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THE WOMAN OF THE IRON BRACELETS

BY

FRANK BARRETT

AUTHOR OF

'FOLLY MORRISON,' 'HONEST DAVIE,' 'FETTERED FOR LIFE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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THE WOMAN OF THE IRON BRACELETS

CHAPTER XVI.

JULY SEVENTH TO AUGUST FIFTEENTH.

The more I think over this new theory of Fawcett's, the more astounding and incredible it seems to me. And I am so fully convinced that his judgment is at fault that I have resolved to say nothing about it to anyone until I am justified by better evidence. And I trust with all my heart that evidence will allow me to pay off one or two grudges I owe my friend by putting him to ridicule.

Even supposing there is sufficient appear-

ance of truth to support his conclusions, I see no good to be done by acquainting St. John with this suspicion of foul play. He can do nothing, and it would only add to his trouble to increase his sense of impotency. And, poor fellow! his life in London now that he is alone can be none too happy. Nor do I think it advisable to tell Mary of Fawcett's surmises, albeit he imputes the same belief to her; for there are circumstances in the affair which render it an unpalatable subject for discussion with a young woman; and so, if I may, I will keep a still tongue for the present. Nevertheless, I am exceedingly anxious about poor Olive, and not a little curious to know what steps Mary meditates taking in that reflective little head of hers. I could not help sounding her a little this evening.

'Do you still propose, my dear,' said I, 'to go to the Sunday-school to-morrow?'

'Oh no,' she replied, with a decisive

manner, which showed that she had reconsidered the project. 'We must suffer Mr. Lawson's suspicions to die a natural death—death from inanition, you call it, don't you? We must be content to do nothing until they return from Whitby—unless Mr. Lawson gives us an opportunity to move.'

'I understand you, my dear,' said I, putting my own construction on her quiet smile. 'If it is a fine day to-morrow—as I think it will be—we might walk over to Ightham Church in the morning.'

'Not for worlds!' she exclaimed, and there the conversation ended; but I am still more curious to know how she expects any opportunity of sounding Mr. Lawson to be found unless it be of our seeking.

* * * * *

We went to church, Mary and I, this morning, and I mightily enjoyed the service, to be sure—the happy look of familiar

faces, the soft light streaming through the windows, the drowsy droning of the organ as the clergyman made his way up to the pulpit, and the feeling of rest and content that comes with settling down into one's customary corner for a good twenty minutes of edifying discourse. The sermon must have been a very good one, from what Mary told me about it at dinner, but I must admit that I lost the thread of it after looking out the text.

'My dear,' said I, when we were taking tea in the afternoon, 'it is my habit to stay at home on Sunday evening, in order that Morton and Ann may have the evening to themselves; and so, if it is agreeable to you, we will have out that book of Mendelssohn and see what we can do with "Elijah."'

She made no immediate response, but presently she said, in her gentle, decided tone:

'If you do not object, I should prefer to go to church.'

'My dear,' I exclaimed, 'heaven forbid that I should turn you from your devotions! Go by all means. "Elijah" can very well wait till after supper.'

So she went as soon as the bells began to ring, and I watched her tripping off with real admiration, saying to myself that a sweeter, better-dressed little lady I had never seen. I spent a pleasant evening reading on the lawn, with now and then a stroll round the walks to notice how the flowers are standing this long spell of dry weather; but about eight, thinking of Mary, I turned out into the road to meet her. And there, to my surprise, I caught sight of her just rounding the corner, with Mr. Lawson on her right and Olive on her left. As they approached I could not help remarking how dowdy poor little Olive looked in her plain old clothes, in comparison with

Mary in her elegant dress, and how homely and insignificant. But her face to me was just as simple and sweet as ever—nay, sweeter, I think, by the foil which her plain hat lent it. Yet, on the other hand, Mary's face looked brighter and more winning for her graceful and elegant toilet—just as a picture looks the handsomer for a fine frame. The truth is, I suspect, that each was dressed in the style most becoming to her particular cast of beauty.

Mr. Lawson, beaming as ever, explained that this fine evening had tempted them to walk over to our church, and that they had the good-fortune to be put in my pew, where they found Miss Smith.

'Well,' said I, 'now you are here, do pray come in and take supper with us. The moon is coming up behind the elms, and at ten o'clock 'twill be as light as day.'

Mr. Lawson glanced at Mary, whose fine eyes added their invitation to mine—and I

thought he did so with a hungering expression on his cadaverous face—and then, with a kind of confused apology, accepted.

Mary took Olive up to her room, while Mr. Lawson and I strolled round the garden, talking about the crops, the weather, Mrs. Lawson, and other matters with equal interest until the young ladies came down. Mary had changed her dress for one St. John admired ; her dark, waving hair was drawn rippling back from her white brow, and a soft lace fichu of the Marie Antoinette kind gave a wonderful piquancy to her beauty, besides making her look a little stouter, which I considered a great advantage. And by her side Olive still looked the same plain, homely little thing.

As they joined us I noticed that Mr. Lawson was strangely discomposed. He could only look at Mary furtively, or with an abashed twinkling of his weak eyes, and his conversation was jerky and almost inco-

herent. But gradually Mary restored his confidence by her wonderful tact and ready wit, which told with equal effect upon Olive. Poor little Olive! she seemed to feel her own insignificance, and more than once I caught her regarding Mary with almost awed admiration—just as a peasant might look at a princess. But Mary won her also; and it delighted my heart to see how Olive responded to her kind advances —how readily she smiled, how happy she seemed to be with us, and how warmly attached the two girls already appeared to be. She looked all the prettier for this happiness, and I saw Mr. Lawson glance at her now and then with satisfaction, but it was of a paternal kind, and not at all like the eager pleasure with which he glanced sidelong at Mary when she spoke and smiled. Altogether, our supper-party was a very pleasant one, and quite banished from my mind those horrible suggestions of my

friend Fawcett—though they return to my mind now with a distressing feeling that there may be some truth in them. Still, I can never think he is correct in the final conclusion he came to. A mean, an unpleasant, even a vicious man, Lawson may be, but a calculating murderer—a villain ten times worse than the man who in a fit of passion slays a faithless friend—that it is impossible to think him. We bade our visitors good-night at the gate, with mutual promises to meet again as soon as the Lawsons return from Whitby.

And now, as I look back on this incident, I ask myself whether Mary foresaw the possibility of Mr. Lawson coming over to our church this evening when she declined to stop at home and try 'Elijah.'

* * * * *

I think an eventless life must be a happy one: for here we are nearly half-way through August, and I find my last note

was made July 7th, and surely no man has lived more happily this last fortnight than I. Mary has settled down into her position, and seems thoroughly contented and happy. She has found numerous little duties to perform, and made many improvements in the house, all tending to give a charm and animation to my life at home, which I never dreamt could be restored after the death of my poor Madge. She is never idle—idleness is incompatible with her active, energetic disposition—and is ever cheerful and hopeful. This shows a complete return of good health as clearly as the improvement in her personal appearance. The sun has given warmth to her complexion, and a fulness to her lips and cheeks that they sadly lacked (though she is still a good deal thinner than I would have her). We have gone out for our constitutional walk or drive regularly every day, wet or fine ; and it is noticeable, though not at all astonish-

ing, how many people are attracted by her piquant looks and pleasant manner, and how many young fellows have scraped up an acquaintance with me who formerly scarcely treated me to a distant nod. But to-day something has occurred which has made our hearts ache—Mary's, as well as mine, I am sure.

When I called at The Moat yesterday, Mrs. Harding asked me if I intended taking Miss Smith to the flower-show at Sevenoaks to-day.

'Yes,' said I, 'if my pony can stretch as far.'

'Oh, you must not tax the poor thing to that extent. Do drive over here, and come with us in the brake.'

I accepted the invitation, thinking it would be more agreeable for Mary to have the company of young people, and that in the new hat she has bought for the occasion she would feel more at ease behind two fine

horses, in a fashionable equipage, and with stylish folks, than in a ramshackle old chaise, with a slow-going old doctor for her sole companion. So accordingly this morning we drove over to The Moat, lunched there, and in the afternoon dashed over to Seven-oaks; and a very lively party we were—Mrs. Harding and her sister Mary (in her new bonnet and creamy pink gloves), young Mr. Harding and his friend, the Hon. Percy Fitzurse. I made myself agreeable to the two elder ladies, and the other gentlemen devoted themselves to Mary, who adapted herself so aptly to the company she was in that one would have said she must have been accustomed to the very best society all her life. The show of flowers was fairly good—though there were none there that I could not have matched with specimens from my own garden—but the chief charm of the exhibition was the assembly of so many smart and elegantly dressed people, and I

observed with satisfaction that none of the handsomest and best-dressed ladies in the place could compare with Mary for good looks and a certain air of refinement which distinguishes her. Well, I had strayed from the party to take the name of a new begonia that pleased me, when a hand was laid on my shoulder, and turning about, I found to my astonishment Harry St. John before me. I was heartily glad to see him, and, shaking his hand, I asked him how it was he came to be there.

'Why,' said he, 'I resolved to take a day off this morning, and you can guess which way my feelings led me. But I found you gone when I reached Wrotham. Morton told me you had come over here to the flower-show, so I just walked over, you know. I haven't seen Mary yet.'

'Come along — we shall find her soon enough, for she's more attractive than any-

thing in the show. She'll be delighted to see you, my boy. Ah, there she is!'

But he had already caught sight of her, as she stood before a stand of roses, one delicately gloved hand resting on the arm of the Hon. Percy Fitzurse, her smiling face turned towards Mr. Harding, who was addressing some observation to her. St. John said nothing, but I saw a shadow fall on his face. He thought perhaps that Mary would not care to see him, being in such smart company, but if so he was greatly mistaken, for as soon as Mary perceived him she disengaged her hand, and met him with real joy suffusing her bright eyes and sweet face.

'What the dickens are the people staring at?' I asked myself; then looking at Mary and St. John as they stood, she with her daintily gloved hand in his great brown one, I saw the contrast in their appearance which struck all observers. Dusty with his long walk, roughly dressed in a flannel shirt, a

threadbare tweed suit, and heavy boots with a patch on one side, he looked like an intelligent gardener, and nothing more, while she looked like a young duchess. He himself must have felt the incongruity of his position, but he did not betray it as Mary introduced him to her friends, despite the look of astonishment on the faces of the Hon. Percy and Mr. Harding. He stood his ground with gentlemanly composure during the exchange of ordinary civilities, then he offered his hand again to Mary, saying that circumstances compelled him to return to London at once. Mary said briefly 'Good-bye,' but all the regret she felt was expressed in her eyes, and they told more than words.

'I was an ass to come in here,' said St. John, as he and I went to the door. 'It was thoughtless and inconsiderate. I ought to have known that I'm out of the swim—the earthen pitcher has no place amongst the brass pots. Good-bye, Doctor.'

Mary sustained her part till we reached home, and perhaps only I observed that her gaiety was forced. But as soon as we were within doors she ran up to her room, and when she came down to dinner her eyes were swollen and red.

CHAPTER XVII.

AUGUST FIFTEENTH TO TWENTIETH.

MARY was very quiet at dinner-time, and when we went for our customary evening stroll it was still I who had to find small talk. I guessed what it was that depressed her, and so I was not surprised when she said, after a longish interval of silence:

'Morton says he came about two.'

We hadn't been talking of St. John, but I knew it was to him she referred.

'It must have been about that time. It would take him best part of two hours to tramp over to Sevenoaks; and a dry tramp he found it, I warrant. His very eyelashes were gray with dust. Did you observe that, my dear?'

'In the heat of the afternoon too—poor Mr. St. John!'

'Oh, a trudge of eight miles is nothing to him. Besides, had he preferred it, he might have come across by rail for sixpence or eightpence.'

'Perhaps he had not even that.'

This might have been the case. He was always heedless in money matters. I remember him, when a lad, starting out to buy a fishing-rod at Maidstone, and giving away his half-crown before he had got out of the village.

'He is very poor,' Mary added.

'What makes you think that, Mary?'

'I am sure of it. He spent all he had to provide things for me. He had to borrow money to bring me down.'

'Yes,' said I to myself; 'and he must needs travel first-class—another proof of his recklessness.'

'They pay shamefully for engraving. He

told me he could earn better wages in a carpenter's shop.'

'Then, why on earth doesn't he work in a carpenter's shop?'

'Because,' she answered, raising her head, and speaking with a little resentment in her tone, 'because it pleases him better to be an engraver.'

'My dear, if he would only stick to carving he might earn a pound a day.'

'An artist is not to be bound down by the slavish regulations of a workshop; and Mr. St. John is an artist, and a gentleman as well.'

I thought it advisable to drop this subject, which evidently irritated her; but when she spoke again there was not a trace of her late asperity—only pity and regret—in her voice.

'He must have said to himself this morning, "It is a fine day; I will go and see them at Wrotham." And, perhaps, coming down he thought how pleasant it

would be to sit with you on the lawn and smoke, and talk about old times. Then to find us gone! It didn't occur to him that the flower-show might be a grand affair, and that we should be there with smart friends. It must have humiliated him to feel that he was not one of them; and what could he have thought of me?'

'My dear child, you surely do not think St. John ungenerous enough to begrudge you an afternoon's enjoyment?'

'Oh no, no! It is only women or womenly men who can feel like that. I should have been horridly jealous in his place; but he was not—there was not a sign of rancour in his face—nothing but kind feeling and regret that he could not stay with us. He only went away because people stared at him, and he thought it might be unpleasant for us. But it is too bad of me even to seem forgetful of what I was and what I am. I ought not to be living

an idle life while he is toiling, and toiling alone.'

'Your life is not an idle one, Mary,' said I; but without regarding my protest she continued:

'You know what I was when he found me—a hunted, homeless, penniless, miserable waif. He gave me all he had to give—he saved me from starvation, from I know not what—the last resource of such unhappy, desperate creatures. Must it not seem to him, who saw me this afternoon dressed with his money, that I am selfish and inconsiderate — thoughtful only of my own pleasure?'

'No, my dear,' said I stoutly. 'To think that would be to do you an injustice, for you are neither selfish nor ungrateful.'

'Indeed, indeed I am not! Oh!' she exclaimed passionately, clasping her hands, 'if I could make some great sacrifice to give him happiness I would. One says lightly,

"I would give the world" for this or that, but it is no idle vaunt to say that I would do anything——' She paused a moment, and then went on, with strenuous earnestness and deliberate emphasis, 'Yes, I would do anything for him—or for you,' she added with tremulous emotion, as she slipped her hand under my arm and pressed it to her, and I believe every word that she uttered.

Thinking over this matter just now, it came into my mind that I could make two people happy by asking St. John to come to us next Sunday. So I dropped him a line of invitation; but having written this, I began to question the prudence of my proceeding. It is clear to me that a very strong attachment exists between St. John and Mary Smith (I am confident that he came to-day rather to see her than me), and to encourage that sentiment may involve consequences which all may have good reason to regret. If he asks her to be his wife, and

she thought his happiness depended on her consent, she would probably yield, even at the sacrifice of that sense of honour which should restrain her. For despite her many admirable qualities, her character is not unblemished, and she must know as well as I that it would be a great wrong to sully her husband's name, and give him children who might have to blush for their mother's fault when time reveals her past. Considering these objections, and reflecting that St. John may be discouraged from any vague hope of marriage by seeing Mary to-day in the society of people in a position so far above his own, it seemed to me a wiser and a kinder thing to suffer them to drift asunder rather than to bring them together again. So, though not without a reluctant sigh, I lit the letter over the candle, and let it burn out in the grate.

* * * * *

I might just as well have let that letter

go; for yesterday (Saturday) afternoon St. John came down without invitation, and notwithstanding my compunctions I was heartily glad to see him. For although we have had no further discussion of the subject, I could plainly see that poor Mary had not ceased to brood over St. John's disappointment of last Tuesday, and her own seeming indifference. It is quite likely that St. John determined to come with the kindly purpose of removing any misapprehension from her mind, for a more generous and considerate man than he does not live. Mary coming across the lawn, thoughtful and serious, from the kitchen-garden, where she had been plucking green peas, at the sound of St. John's voice in my study, stopped midway to listen with alert attention, like a blackbird at the call of its mate, and then, as he strode out under the veranda, a cry of gladness escaped her, her fingers lost their grip upon her gathered apron, and, the peas

scattering from it, she ran forward to meet her friend with unconcealed joy.

'Oh, this is kind of you!' she said, in her low, soft tone, as she gave him her hand.

'Ah, there are no limits to my kindness in matters of self-indulgence, Mary,' he replied, laughing.

Then I joined them, and there being no further scope for sentiment, Mary clasped her hands, looking on the ground with rueful amusement, and cried: 'See what I have done!' and we set about picking up the scattered peas with remarks not particularly memorable, but all indicating a very happy condition of mind on our part.

'It's rather late in the year for peas, isn't it?' said St. John.

'To be sure it is,' I replied. 'You'll find none like 'em in this parish, I warrant. We're nigh the end of August, and they're as fresh and full as if it were early summer.'

Then Mary, eyeing her apron, said there

would scarcely be enough for such an additional one as St. John at our table; so we went down to the garden, and plucked as many again, laughing and chatting the while, and after that we sat in the shade on the lawn with a basin, shelling the legumes. I know no occupation so pleasantly provocative of cheerful chat as shelling peas —especially if they yield well and are of your own growing. As the cods popped and the peas rattled out into the basin we kept up a merry fire of comments and small witticisms, mingled with what news we had to tell of the last three weeks.

'Now, come, tell us what you have been doing, Hal?' said I, when we had exhausted our own budget of news.

'Oh, nothing very amusing, I assure you,' said he. 'I've gone back to the bench.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' said I.

'I am not at all glad,' said Mary.

St. John laughed.

'The Doctor thinks I shall make name and fame as a sculptor, and a heap of money into the bargain; and you, Mary—well, why would you have me stick to engraving?'

'Because I should prefer it myself; because the idea of going in with a number of workmen — where each is only part of a machine — is humiliating; because it must be ever so much nicer to see a beautiful picture growing under your hand——'

'But very few of the pictures one has to produce are beautiful. All tend to make you a misanthrope. The bad ones lead you to despise the artist; the good ones make you despise yourself. You can cut the blocks in your own den, and smoke pipes all day; but there's nothing like engraving for making you desperately discontented with yourself.'

Mary went on shelling peas mechanically, but her eyes were on St. John's face, and by the melancholy in their pensive depth, I

think she may have concluded, as I did, that, even with the solace of innumerable pipes, St. John had found solitude intolerable, and gone back to the factory that he might not have opportunity for brooding over his misfortunes. Perhaps, too, her heart ached with vain regrets—with insatiable desire to lighten his labours, to be a cheerful companion to him, and make him happy at his work, as I had seen him in Brixton.

'Now, that's impossible at the bench,' continued St. John airily. 'You know exactly what you can do and what you can't do—or if you don't, the foreman will very quickly enlighten you. You get, say, a couple of gross of panels to do, all alike, every man jack of 'em, and by the time you have done a dozen or so you can dig away without a thought, and chat with your neighbour from morn till dewy eve. Then it is so delightfully regular, Doctor; you don't have to go in a moment before the bell rings, or stay in a moment

after the "all out" sounds. Your mind's never disturbed with fears for the future, as you know perfectly well that so long as the British public want sideboards with a stag's head in the middle and a garland of impossible fruit and flowers on each side—and they never will cease to want such abominations —you'll have stags' heads and garlands to carve all your life (unless you take to drink or rheumatism), for which you will get regularly (barring strikes and other visitations) your forty shillings a week.'

'Forty shillings a week!' I exclaimed; 'is that all you earn?'

'That's the price to a penny, and there are men with greater talent who get no more.'

'It's monstrous.'

'Not a bit of it. It's the market price of the article.'

'And do you work very late?' asked Mary.

'Knock off at six. That gives me the whole evening for improving my mind.'

'Ah, that's something, my dear fellow,' said I, with a feeling of satisfaction. 'Now, where do you spend your evenings?'

'In an asylum for incurables,' he replied gravely; then, seeing our looks of alarm, he burst into a laugh and explained that he had become a member of a Bohemian Club. 'We've all got something the matter with us,' said he. 'Some are afflicted with idleness; most of us are confirmed bachelors; but the one incurable ailment that affects the lot is poverty. Without that, the true Bohemian is not.'

He spoke lightly and carelessly, but there was an under-current of bitter feeling, which made his mirth unpalatable to us; and he, detecting this by our long faces, had the good taste to turn the subject into another channel, where only the natural sweetness of his disposition was evident.

Mary was longer than usual in dressing

for dinner, and when she came down she looked more charming than I have ever seen her look—perhaps because there was more than usual animation in her face and brilliancy in her eyes as she perceived the admiration with which St. John regarded her. She had taken greater pains with her toilet, and donned the best she had as a tacit compliment to St. John, who, though but a factory hand, and out-at-elbows, as it were, was still to her the dearest friend on earth and the finest gentleman she knew.

Though I must note this on Hal's behalf: he has smartened himself up considerably since we saw him on Tuesday. Maybe, seeing Mary in such well-dressed company, he took himself to task for his carelessness in that respect. Anyhow, he has bought himself a new pair of boots (which, to be sure, he sadly needed), and a neat silk handkerchief; also he has had his beard trimmed, and alto-

gether looks a world the better for these little niceties.

It was nearly two when I turned in last night, and it might have been yet later had not Mary detected my drowsiness and taken pity on me. But St. John protracted the parting unconscionably, ever finding something more to say, so that I am sure we shook hands and said 'Good-night' half a dozen times before we finally separated, and then both Mary and St. John were reluctant to go. And this set me thinking of the nightingales, who in their season of happiness seem to need sleep neither day nor night.

They must have been up betimes, too, this morning; for when I came down I found them dressing the mantelpiece of my room with sprays of honeysuckle and traveller's joy, got in a ramble through Oldham and Sealchart, a distance of two or three miles from here. And how well they looked—

exuberant in bodily health and spirits! It did one good to see them eat and drink when breakfast was served.

They had hardly lost sight of each other for five minutes the whole day, and while they were together St. John's high spirits never flagged; yet it seemed to me that there was a kind of reckless tone in his gaiety, as if he had said to himself, 'Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we part.' Still, notwithstanding this disposition to profit by opportunity and make the most of his chances, he has maintained a perfect and undeviating self-restraint in relation to Mary which certainly reflects the greatest credit on his manly strength and fine feeling. I have watched him closely with a certain amount of trepidation, an uncomfortable misgiving that the happiness of to-day would be marred by regrets, but not one fear has been justified. By no impulsive touch of the hand, by no word or look, has he betrayed his love to

Mary. But that he loves her with all his heart and soul, as only the man can love who has not made a plaything of woman, and trifled with a noble passion, an observer who knows even less than I of such matters must have seen by the wonderful tenderness and reverence and sweetness of his manner with her.

Only once has that bitter undercurrent of his sentiments become evident. In the evening he seated himself at the piano, and began to bang out the march from 'Athalie' in a manner to scandalize respectable folks on their way to church, but after bungling through the first bar of the andante movement, he rose from his seat and came down to the window, whistling the continuation softly.

'Try it again, Hal,' said I encouragingly, 'it will come back to you.'

'Oh, it isn't my memory that's at fault; it's these hands—look at 'em.'

He stretched out his palms for me to see how hard and horny they had become by the constant use of chisel and mallet.

'The only instrument they're fit for now is a barrel-organ,' he added.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AUGUST THIRTIETH.

When Mary left us for the night I brought St. John into my room here, and having settled ourselves down in the easy-chairs with the spirit-stand and a box of cigars between us, I told him that, by my advice, Mr. Lawson had taken his wife and Olive to Whitby—this being really the first opportunity of speaking to him on a subject which I thought it inadvisable to open in Mary's presence.

'I am glad to hear this,' said he cheerfully; 'the change must do Olive good, as well as my mother. I suppose you have not heard from them since they went away?'

'Yes; Mary received a letter from Olive last week. She writes in capital spirits, and says she has not seen your mother looking so bright and well for years.'

'Mary!' he exclaimed in a tone of astonishment. 'Does she know Olive?'

'They became acquainted just before she went away. Mary, with wonderful finesse, managed to introduce herself the very morning you last left us. And I may tell you, Hal, that she did so for your sake—that she might use her influence to counteract any sinister sway that Mr. Lawson may have over the dispositions of your mother and sister, and to overcome their unnatural antipathy to you. And considering the short time she had to work in, her success was marvellous. She won Olive's heart, and I have not the slightest doubt that when they return she will accomplish what she has so well begun. You have no idea how cleverly she managed it.'

He nodded, but asked no questions, as he looked at me with a kind of wonder in his face as he silently smoked on.

'She has an enormous sense of obligation to you,' I continued, 'and, together with this intense feeling of gratitude, she has genuine sympathy with your mother and Olive in this strange mental twist that affects them, you know——'

He nodded again, his eyes still on me, but looking far away; then, after two or three more whiffs in perfect silence, he gulped down something, and said thickly and with a little tremor in his manly voice:

'What a beautiful woman she is, Doctor!'

'Yes,' said I, 'she looked very lovely when she sat at the piano playing that symphony of Beethoven's.'

'Lovely in every way,' he murmured, 'lovable in all things.' Then, after another interval of silence: 'It must make you happier to have her with you always.'

'Ah! I can't tell you how much, my boy! She seems always the same, yet somehow every day I am surprised by the discovery of some fresh charm. Whatever her faults may be—and we may be sure she is not faultless, any more than the rest of humanity—they are not of the mean and petty kind that too often disfigure her sex. She is free from affectation, and caprice, and conceit, and'—he waved his hand, smiling, as if to signify that these assurances were unnecessary—'and—well, I assure you she makes me feel younger and better, and the world more beautiful, and life a blessing rather than a curse.'

'Yes; she inspires me with the same feeling,' said he, adding in a lower tone: 'when I am in her presence.'

He gently tapped the ash from his cigar, raising his eyebrows; then, dropping back into his chair with a sigh, he knitted his fingers over his knee, and said:

'I suppose she has quite a large circle of acquaintances, now ?'

'Why, yes, Hal ; they seem to be looking us up a bit. We have been out a good deal in the last fortnight.'

'They looked pleasantish sort of people you were with at the flower-show.'

'Yes, it's a good family. The young fellow with the fair moustache was the Hon. Percy Fitzurse.'

'I know. A good family. Lucky beggar ! See him often ?'

'We've seen him once since we lunched at The Moat. But you're not jealous, Hal ?'

'Jealous !' he exclaimed, with a derisive laugh. 'Why on earth should I be jealous ? Envious, perhaps—jealous, not at all. If Fitzurse is a good man, and Mary loves him, I pray God that he may make her his wife.'

'It's a comfort to hear you say that, Hal. I am heartily glad to find that I've been

running on a wrong scent. What an old fool I must be! To tell you the truth, my dear boy, I conceived that your feeling for Mary was something more than mere friendly affection, and that—well, in short, I fancied you were in love with her.'

'So I am,' he replied, almost fiercely. 'I would give my soul to have her all to myself, to make her my wife—if in making her my wife I shouldn't drag her down to my own miserable level. What right have I, with forty shillings a week, to marry a lady, to rob her of friends, and position, to doom a woman of refinement to domestic drudgery and the sordid shifts of penury?'

'Ay, there's truth in that! Of course, your fortunes may improve; but, on the other hand, it is possible your mother may live ten or twenty years.'

'I hope so!'

'In any case, it would be unwise to base our calculations on uncertainties.'

'And yet,' he said reflectively, and in a softened tone, 'if I had nothing—nothing but the prospect of misery, Mary would be my wife if I asked her.'

'Do you think so, really?' I asked, feeling very uncomfortable at this turn.

'I am sure of it; and the more readily because it involves self-sacrifice on her side. It's in the nature of these generous creatures to throw themselves away—even the lowest of women. Look at the streets for a proof. But she, beside the common feeling of her sex, has the higher principle of heroism—the heroism that has led such noble hearts to accept martyrdom with joy. Shall I profit by that principle to make a martyr of her for my own selfish gratification? No, no! If I must have a mate, she must be of another class: a general servant might do—a wench who can wash my shirts, and fetch the beer, and bring my grub to the works when she's been slopping out the room at home.'

'Heaven forbid, my boy, that it should ever come to that!'

'Jealous of Fitzurse,' he murmured, disregarding my apostrophe; 'that's not the sort of man I can be jealous of, as I understand jealousy.'

'I don't quite understand that, Hal,' said I, glad to get away from the personal to the abstract.

'Don't you! Why, if a man by his superior talent earns five pounds a week, I should be a fool or a mean sort of a brute to be jealous of him; but if a fellow with less than my ability were shoved up into a better position than mine, oh! then I should be jealous. Jealousy seems to me the natural revolt against injustice. Doesn't Carlyle say somewhere that man can stand anything except injustice? It's awfully true, whoever said it. There's no injustice to me in Mary marrying Fitzurse, always allowing that he's a decent fellow, besides being a lucky beggar;

but I should consider it an injustice and an insult to me if she preferred a man unmistakably inferior to me. I should be jealous then, with a vengeance! I should feel that such a man had no right to possess her and dispossess me, and rather than suffer him to have her—by the Lord!' he muttered between his teeth, 'I would kill him.'

Now I know the deepness of St. John's feeling for Mary, and the extent of his passion, I can only regard his poverty as a provision of Providence to prevent his marrying her. That is the only real barrier between them, for assuredly in his present frame of mind he would find excuses for anything she has done in the past; nay, it might even exalt her character in his opinion to know that she has perpetrated a crime from which ordinary women would shrink. Those iron bracelets in my cabinet prove beyond a doubt that her crime was not a slight one; but supposing that she has

committed manslaughter in the defence of her honour (and that is the most likely thing that I can imagine), St. John would only respect her the more for that, though by law she might be condemned to penal servitude for the act. And the danger is greater because Society would certainly shun her, though a verdict of justifiable homicide were returned; for that would justify St. John in making her his wife. But that is not my view of the case. Mary ought not to marry St. John, or anyone else, with this shadow of a crime upon her. I would it were otherwise, with all my heart, for I love St. John and Mary as if they were my own children, and (but for that one objection) I could make them both happy by a stroke of this pen. Here have I more money than I know what to do with—not a soul in the world with any claim upon me; and it would give me the greatest happiness in life to dispose of my estate so that, still keeping enough for

my own wants, I might see those two in the enjoyment of the remainder.

I woke with a snort this morning, feeling a hand on my shoulder, and looking up over the edge of the bedclothes, I found St. John leaning over me with a warm, pleasant smile on his face, as if he were saying to himself: 'How jolly comfortable the old boy looks!'

'Why, have I over-slept myself?' I asked. 'What time is it, Hal?'

'Time enough to turn over for another good snooze, Doctor. If I'm not in by nine I may get the "bullet," as we say in the shop. Couldn't go without waking you up to say good-bye, for it may be a good while before I see you again.'

'You'll run down again one day, my boy—soon.'

'One day,' said he, with a sad inflection in his voice, 'but not soon. There's too much

temptation here for a mere ordinary man. Good-bye.'

He went away, and I turned over with a sigh. Down below I heard his big laugh and Mary's sweet voice. She had learnt overnight from Ann that St. John wished to be called at half-past five, and was down in time to give him his breakfast.

By this morning's post a letter came for Mary, which she handed to me after reading it.

Mrs. Harding asked her to go to a garden-party at The Moat on Thursday; a similar invitation had come for me. When I told her this, she asked if I wished to go.

'Why, nothing will please me better, my dear! They are delightful people,' said I.

'You won't mind going without me, will you?' she asked.

'Without you, Mary! I'd rather by halt stay at home than go alone.'

She laid her hand upon mine, smiling, and said :

'Then we will both stay at home, and have our own little garden-party. There are all those cuttings to be taken.'

'Ay, ay, my dear ; we can take them and find time for less monotonous amusement as well. I know well enough what is in your mind, and don't intend to encourage this straining of sentiment. You are thinking of the flower-show last week, and St. John's poverty. But you can't enrich him by stinting yourself, nor make him happy by denying yourself rational pleasures.'

'Alas !' said she, with a sigh, 'if only one could——'

'But you can't, Mary, and so you will oblige me by writing to accept that invitation.'

She made no reply ; but after sitting in silent meditation for a minute or two, she asked me quietly if I had told Mrs. Harding

what I knew about her. This is, I think, the only time she has referred to her past; but she spoke without emotion or constraint, and it pleases me to think that her confidence in me has now passed the border-line of doubt.

'I have told her nothing, my dear, nor anyone else. And you need have no fear that I shall.'

'I believe she thinks that I am your adopted daughter.'

'She is free to imagine what she likes, Mary. And, indeed, she is not far out, anyhow, for you have taken my little Madge's place here,' said I, laying my hand on my heart.

'And I hope I may never lose it,' she said earnestly, closing her fingers on my hand. 'But I don't think it can be right to profit by her ignorance. Indeed, I am sure that it is wrong, for I feel when I am with these people that I am taking a false position.'

'That alters the case altogether, my child,' said I. 'God forbid that I should do anything to weaken your conscientious scruples. So write as you proposed, and I will call at The Moat on my round to-morrow, and fudge up an excuse for myself.'

I am exceedingly delighted with this proof of high principle and right feeling on my dear Mary's part, and also with her breaking through that barrier of silence with regard to the past, which has led me sometimes to doubt if her fault were as easily to be defended as I hope it may be.

* * * * *

I have abstained from writing up my journal for over a week, not (as in former instances of neglect in this particular) because the happiness of one day was so like that of the preceding one that I could find nothing fresh to tell, but because an incident occurred on Wednesday which has left such a distressing impression on my mind that even

now I approach the subject with compunction. Briefly, the facts are these: Being in Maidstone on Tuesday, I drew a hundred pounds from the bank to pay the monthly accounts, etc. The clerk paid me in ten notes of ten pounds each, and these I put in an envelope, on which I had taken down the numbers, as I habitually do. On coming home I took them from the envelope, counted them again to see that they were all right, and put them in the drawer of my desk. I locked the desk and put the key in my pocket. On Tuesday morning, as Mary and I were in the greenhouse potting cuttings, Morton brought the butcher's bill, with Mr. Bull's compliments, and would I mind letting him have the money, as he had a very heavy bill to meet.

'Certainly,' said I; 'if he will wait a couple of minutes, I will come in and pay him.'

Morton went back to the house with my message.

'I must wash my hands, Mary,' said I, for my hands were grimy with compost.

'Couldn't I pay the man?' Mary asked, seeing my disinclination to quit my work.

'Why, to be sure you can, my dear. Do you take the key out of this waistcoat pocket —your little fingers will slip in easily enough; that's it—the key of my desk. You will find some loose cash in the bottom drawer.'

She went in, paid the bill, and brought back the key, which she slipped into my pocket. Wednesday afternoon Jennings, the builder, sent round to ask if I could cash his cheque for sixty pounds. When I had counted out six notes from the packet in my desk, I noticed that only three remained. Thinking I had miscounted, I went over the notes again (a dozen times, I am sure), and then finding still one short, I compared the notes with the numbers I had noted, and discovered, beyond all doubt, that DA 5678 was missing. Suddenly I recollected that the butcher's bill

had been paid the day before, and this at once suggested an explanation of the affair. I went to the window. Mary was sitting under the veranda with a book.

'My dear,' said I, 'did you pay that bill yesterday with a note or in cash?'

'I paid with the loose money, as you told me,' she replied, looking up from her book and meeting my eyes with perfect composure. I made some excuse—I hardly knew what I was saying—which she accepted with a slight inclination of the head, and then, dropping her eyes, she went on reading as if the subject were of all-absorbing interest. But I know now that the book she had was the 'Medical Examiner' for 1843, and I would defy even a medical bookworm to find anything in that to engross his thoughts for five minutes at a stretch. She must have taken it down at haphazard from my shelf, for certainly there is nothing in the title to attract the attention of a young girl.

I have tried to explain the loss of this note in every conceivable way, but somehow the conviction forces itself upon me that Mary has taken it. The loss of ten pounds is nothing — I would have given Mary all there was there without question had she asked me for it, or had I known she wanted money. It is the theft itself—the want of faith and feeling—which grieves me so much. Yet have I a right to expect perfection in her? Have I not said to myself again and again that I must be prepared for ugly surprises?

Her manner is unchanged; she is cheerful, and pleasant, and unconstrained. Her eyes meet mine with perfect steadiness. I warrant if anyone had observed our behaviour during the past few days he would have accused me rather than her of having a guilty conscience. For, try as I may, I cannot conceal my uneasiness, even from myself. Over and over again the question comes up in my mind:

'Why on earth should she rob me of that petty sum of money?'

Well, it seemed to me last night that I had the reply to that question, for after dinner she asked me if I could spare her for a day.

'To be sure, my dear,' said I. 'Whenever you like.'

'Thank you,' she replied. 'I will take to-morrow.'

I asked her if she would like the pony-carriage, but she declined it, saying that she should go by train; but where to, or for what purpose, she did not vouchsafe the slightest hint. And, to tell the truth, a little irrational feeling of vexation, of wonder, pride, or I know not what, made me refrain from trying to break through her strange reserve.

She went away this morning; and now my heart sinks with the fear that she may not return.

CHAPTER XIX.

AUGUST THIRTY-FIRST.

After writing the foregoing this afternoon, I could write no more. For the mere suspicion that Mary had gone away never to return inspired me with such a terrible feeling of desolation as I have not felt since I stood beside the death-bed of my dear sister Madge. In a moment all irritation excited by her want of confidence vanished, and every fault sank into insignificance as a thousand instances of her sweetness and amiability, her thoughtful consideration, her sprightly intelligence and cheerful companionship, crowded my memory. Was she not wel-

come to all I had? Had she not taken the place of my little sister?

Then, what a fool must I be to grudge her the privilege of a sister, to expect her to give me an account of every trifle she took for her necessities! And what right had I to inquire into her affairs or find fault with her reticence on matters that nowise concerned me? 'Tis I, and not she, who has been wanting in faith. I would certainly tear up all I have set down about this petty affair, but that I feel it will be good for me to look at it now and then as a reminder of my folly.

'Has she gone away for ever?' I asked myself, going out into the air from my study, which seemed to have grown oppressively close and gloomy. 'Has some occurrence unknown to me called her back to the other life, about which she had been so profoundly silent?' The abstraction of that note indicated some pressing need of money. Was it to meet the expenses of this journey? As

I stood there turning these things over in my mind, lame Jack, my old terrier, limped up on his three legs, and, wagging his stump of a tail, whined uneasily. Then, cocking his ear reflectively, he trotted back to Mary's window, sniffed at the crack, sat down, looking about him as if he couldn't make out what had happened, and then, whining again, trotted up to me for sympathy. He loves Mary in his doggish fashion as much as I do.

'Yes, Jack,' said I, patting him, 'twill be a miserable time for both of us if she doesn't come back.'

I strolled listlessly into the drawing-room, where my eye fell on my 'cello and the piano.

'Must they be shut up again? shall we play no more?' thought I, with grievous despondency, and, going again into the garden, I looked up at the leaden clouds, and round my flower borders, but without any kind of interest, and truly everything seemed of a

piece with my own dulness and despondency. All this made me realize how much of my late happiness has been due to the companionship of Mary Smith, and what a hold she had taken upon my affection.

A ring at the bell about four o'clock set my heart beating quickly with joyful hope, and, thinking this might be Mary come back already, I myself hastened to the front-door and opened it; but instead of the sweet face I wished to see, the bilious visage of Mr. Lawson confronted me.

'How do you do, Dr. Harvey?' said he, dropping the tips of his fingers into my hand. 'You are surprised to see me, I have no doubt.'

'Why, to be sure, sir, I thought you were at Whitby,' said I, adding to myself as I led him into my room, 'and I wish to goodness you were.'

'We came back yesterday afternoon — a fortnight earlier than I intended to return,

for Dr. Muller, the specialist whom I consulted with regard to my poor wife's mental condition, advised a stay of at least six weeks at the seaside; but——' He drew a deep sigh, and, laying his black kid gloves on the side-table with his felt hat, gave his head a melancholy shake, and left the conclusion of the sentence to my imagination.

'Mrs. Lawson is no worse, I hope?'

'I try to think so, Doctor; but I must confess that she is no better. It is most disheartening—most disheartening,' he sighed again as he sank into a chair. 'The more so,' he continued despondently, 'since she derived so much benefit from the change during the first fortnight. All the unpleasant symptoms disappeared; we had every reason to believe that she had recovered perfect health of mind and body. But in the last two weeks she has gone back, back, back, physically and morally.

She has lost strength and appetite, and on Thursday last she passed through a crisis even more alarming than that which occurred a month ago, when Mr. St. John made his unfortunate visit.'

'May I ask what produced the attack?'

'The merest trifle. Some little difference of opinion with Olive respecting a trip we proposed to take. An absolutely groundless offence on her part—for the dear child, you know, is quite the last person in the world to intentionally wound her mother's feelings.'

'Certainly no one could show stronger filial affection than she.'

'Her devotion is not less touching than her patient forbearance; for this last development of Mrs. Lawson's malady—I can call it nothing else—has been marked by extreme irritability alternating with a most distressing depression of spirits. Yet Olive's sympathy never tires, her endurance never gives way. And her task is the more trying

because there is no responsiveness on Mrs. Lawson's part. In fact——' He hesitated, fixing his colourless eyes on me and blinking uneasily, as if he doubted whether I was to be trusted, and then continued: 'Well, I can have no secret from you, Dr. Harvey—the truth is that my unhappy wife exhibits an utter loss of affection for poor Olive, a want of feeling which I fear may grow into a positive antipathy similar to that she has shown for her son.'

The phases of mania are so diverse and inexplicable that this sudden change from love to aversion failed to astonish me; but, remembering the hostile attitude abruptly taken by Olive towards her brother, I was struck by the similarity of the two cases, and this exciting a misgiving on her account, I said:

'And how does Olive bear this terrible misfortune?'

'Bravely — most bravely, Doctor. Her

fortitude seems to increase with the demands made upon it. And, then, the change has certainly done her a great deal of good. I never saw her in better looks.'

'Come, this is very satisfactory, at any rate.'

'Yes,' said he, rubbing one clammy hand over the other, and blinking at me again with the same doubting expression. 'Very satisfactory. I do fervently pray that she may be sustained through this ordeal, and that her strength may not give way. Indeed, it is so terrible to think of her lapsing into a hypochondriacal state, that I shall watch the effect of a return to a seclusive life at Higham Court with the utmost anxiety. We have only too much reason to fear that her mind is susceptible to the same affliction exhibited by her poor mother, and though I know but very little about such matters, it seems to me that mental disorders are not only hereditary, but actually contagious.'

'There can be no doubt of it,' said I. 'You have only to observe how one hysterical person sets off another to be convinced of the fact.'

'That is precisely what was in my mind —only you express it so much more clearly,' said he, obviously delighted to find that I shared his opinion. 'Of course, if she does suffer by the conditions to which she is at present exposed, we shall have to consider the advisability of changing them.'

'In what way, sir?' I asked.

'By separating her from Mrs. Lawson. Pray do not misunderstand me. No matter what extremes my wife's disorder may take, I would never assent to her being put away in an asylum; but if it is necessary for her own well-being, I should certainly remove Olive from the Court. I am afraid you do not approve of the suggestion, Dr. Harvey?'

'On the contrary, it appears to me the most humane and reasonable course to take,

and it will be even more so if Mrs. Lawson's antipathy to her increases.'

'You cannot imagine, Doctor, what a relief it is to have your support,' said he, and for once he looked as if he really meant what he said. 'I should not like her to go far from us; we might make a little home for her in some bright and animated place at a short railway distance, so that we might still keep in touch one with another—Maidstone, for instance.' Again he blinked at me doubtingly, and whilst I was trying to recollect what it was Fawcett had told me in connection with Maidstone which made that place seem undesirable as a home for Olive, he continued: 'But we will hope that it may not come to that. Mrs. Lawson's condition may change as suddenly for the better as it did for the worse; and then, if we take Olive about a little more—a day or two in London or at the seaside occasionally—and endeavour to mix a little more in society——

Ah ! that reminds me, I have not inquired after Miss Smith. Is she quite well ?'

'Very well indeed, thank you. She is out at present, but I expect her home shortly,' I replied, trying to speak with conviction.

'I do hope you will bring her to the Court at the very earliest opportunity. Olive is so very anxious to see her again ; and Mrs. Lawson has spoken of her frequently, and always with affectionate interest.'

I promised to call to-morrow morning and take Mary with me unless she had any other engagement, and we both rose from our seats. Mr. Lawson, taking up his hat and gloves from the side table, bent forward to read the title of a book ; and then, talking about the possibility of establishing a library for Ightham and Wrotham, he went round the room, picking out a book here and there to glance at its contents, just as he had done on a former visit. But I noticed that the older books interested him now.

'Ah!' he exclaimed, opening a volume, 'I declare, here is a biographical sketch of Dr. Harrington—my mother's father. A great man. How curious! May I ask you to lend me the book for a day or so?'

'With the greatest pleasure. But, pray, let me dust it, for I'll be bound it hasn't been taken down from the shelf since the room was papered.'

But, taking the book in my hand, I was surprised to see as I flecked it with my handkerchief that no dust came from it, and turning it over I read on the back, 'Medical Examiner, 1843.' The very book Mary was reading with such apparent interest when I questioned her about the missing note. I handed the book to Mr. Lawson without comment, but I wondered then — and I wonder still more now — whether it was merely an extraordinary coincidence that this particular volume, after standing there unused for perhaps five years, should thus be

taken down at hazard within so short a space of time first by Mary and now by Mr. Lawson.

When I let Mr. Lawson out by the front-door, lame Jack, who had possibly been making a round of the village in search of Mary, came in, and limped off down the passage with a business-like air to have another look in her room. And then, as I closed the door, I heard him break into a regular howl of delight. As I hastened down the passage, wondering what this meant, he bundled in by the back-door, wagging his stump furiously, and just giving me a look, as if to say, 'It's all right, come on,' out he scuttles again on his three legs, and I, going after him, found, to my inexpressible surprise and delight, Mary under the veranda, taking off her gloves, but still wearing her hat.

'My dear child,' said I, giving her a hearty hug, 'why, this is a surprise! I

didn't hear you come in, and didn't expect you home for ever so long.'

'Didn't you?' said she. 'I should have told you had I thought I could not get back for dinner. I came down by the three o'clock train from Victoria.'

'Ah, you have been to London?'

'Yes, and, oh! I'm so glad to get back. It is simply abominable there to-day.'

'Well, Wrotham has been dull enough, my dear, without you. Have you seen St. John?'

'No,' she replied, looking me full in the face with her steady reflective eyes. 'Only someone I wished to consult.'

'To be sure, my dear. That's your affair, not mine. Well, I've just got rid of a visitor.'

'Mr. Lawson. I saw him in the distance, and so came in by Mill Lane.'

'Ah! that's how it was I didn't hear you. Well, well!' and I gave her another kiss,

feeling so happy to have her under my wing again. 'There's bad news of our friends at the Court.'

'Yes, I know,' said she gravely.

'Why, how did you learn it, Mary?'

'I stood near your window and heard all that he said,' she answered quietly; and then, observing my surprise, she smiled and said: 'Not a very lady-like proceeding on my part, you think?'

'To be sure, my dear, it isn't exactly what I should have expected of you.'

'When the happiness of those we love is at stake,' said she, with impressive earnestness, 'when it seems possible that you may save them from a great calamity, you are not to be turned from your purpose by scruples, by principle, by anything.'

'A dangerous doctrine, my dear,' said I, shaking my head gravely.

'Yes,' said she, with a smile in which there was a little malice, but far more tender sweet-

ness; 'a doctrine that I first saw put in practice by a gentleman who snatched from the hands of Justice a girl who might but for that have ended her days in prison.'

We had been walking up and down the little terrace; being now at the window of my study, she stopped, and said:

'Mr. Lawson borrowed a book. Will you show me where he took it from?'

'There is no necessity for that, Mary. It is the book you were reading the other day.'

She looked at me with those unfathomable eyes of hers in silence for some moments, and then they seemed to light up with a flash of conviction.

'Is there anything in that more than a curious coincidence?' I asked.

'There may be,' she answered. 'I think there is.' After that she was quite silent, being wholly absorbed in her own thoughts. We walked across the lawn, and I neither attempted to question her nor to pass the

matter over, preferring to leave her to the guidance of her own feelings. She must have perceived this, for presently she said : ' There are things that I shall never care to tell you. All about my past life, for instance. Nothing can undo that. And there are misfortunes and terrible possibilities that would be harder to bear if the knowledge of them gave pain to a dear friend.'

' It is not on that account, my dear, that I have refrained from questioning you. Believe me, I want to know no more than you feel disposed to tell me, and only that in the hope that I may make the load a little lighter for you to bear.'

' Yes, yes, I know,' she answered, pressing my arm, on which her hand rested. ' And there are other things that I should like to talk about to you—that I feel almost ashamed to keep secret from you. And I feel this especially to-day.'

' For your own sake, my dear, I would have

you keep no more secrets than are absolutely necessary. They are troublesome bedfellows at the best, and lead to all sorts of misconceptions and bothers.'

'I said the same thing to myself yesterday before I determined to go to London; for you might have given me all the information I went there to get.'

'And why did you prefer to go to London, Mary?'

'It seemed to me more prudent.'

'Why, surely, my dear, you have no reason to think that I might betray your confidence?'

'No; not intentionally,' she answered, her even tone unaltered by the dash of asperity in my question; and then, as if in answer to some inner protest of her own rather than to mine, she continued: 'One ought not to breathe suspicion before one is quite sure of the facts, and I am not sure of them, and it's idle to talk of one's projects unless one feels

convinced that they must succeed, and I have no such conviction, only a great hope —a great hope,' she repeated, with a sort of rapture sparkling in her eyes, and a smile on her lip.

'And can't you even tell me what that hope is?' I asked, as I seated her on the garden lounge, and myself beside her.

'I should like to,' she replied, her eyes twinkling with pleasure at the thought, as she turned them to me. For a moment or two she sat thus in silence, hesitating between desire and reluctance; then she said: 'You shall decide for me, judging by an imaginary case. Supposing'—she covered her eyes with her delicate hand, and rocked herself slowly as she taxed her inventive powers—'supposing some friends are climbing the Alps, and on the edge of a precipice they are overtaken by a blinding storm of snow, so that they can neither go back nor go forward, but in the shelter of a rock are forced to

watch the snow rising higher and higher, burying them in. And suppose while the rest are lying there benumbed and helpless, one of them creeps to the edge of the abyss, and, looking down, fancies that he sees, far, far below, something that looks like a village, and he thinks, "If I could only reach that, I should find men who could save my friends." But the descent is terrible—oh, terrible! and he has nothing to help him down to the nearest ledge but the slight cord that has served to tie them together in the ascent. Still, he fancies that with the help of that cord he might reach the ledge, and from thence get down to another, and so on till he reaches the village. Now, if you were in his place, with those thoughts in your mind, what should you do?'

'Well, Mary, I know very well what I should not do—I should not trust myself to the cord. I should prefer being snowed up to knocking my brains out, and should hand

over the cord to someone a little less bulky.'

'Ah, but this one that I speak of is the slightest and nimblest of the party. And it is only because he is so slight that the cord may be trusted. He feels that only he can do this thing. And though he may fail and his attempt end in his own destruction, doing no good to his friends, yet, because they are dearer to him than life itself, he determines to make the attempt. Now, can you put yourself in his place and say what you should do?'

I scratched my ear and shook my head gravely in silence.

'Should you tell your friends what you believed you saw and what you had made up your mind to do?' she asked.

'I don't see how that could improve matters, my dear,' said I, thinking about trusting myself to a cord over the edge of a precipice.

'No; but it might make matters a great deal worse and ruin the only hope of deliverance. For surely the others would never permit this one to throw himself away for them.'

'To be sure they wouldn't allow that. But I'll tell you what they might do if they were men. They might say, "If this stripling can get down, certainly we may. We will all make the attempt."'

'Then what becomes of the slender cord upon which the only chance of success depends?'

'I forgot that, hang it! But it's pretty clear to me what I should do if I were one of the others—I should fling that cord away, to prevent the young fellow risking his neck.'

'Do you think that could prevent him?' she asked, with a smile. 'No; even without that to support him, this one, with a last desperate hope, would fling himself from

rock to rock, and struggle on till the life was battered out of him.'

The subdued vehemence with which she spoke these last words, the intense earnestness of purpose that marked her countenance, frightened me.

'In that case, my dear,' said I, 'it would be a mercy on his part not to whisper a word of his purpose to those friends of his. That's my opinion.'

'And it is mine also,' said she, rising.

The thought of hanging in space on that cord had so affected me that I had partly lost sight of the purpose of this fable; but now I perceived that I had fallen in the trap and given my countenance to Mary's silence.

CHAPTER XX.

SEPTEMBER FIRST.

Before falling asleep last night it occurred to me that if I gave Mary free access to my desk at all times it would remove the necessity to supply her wants by surreptitious means, and so after breakfast next morning I said to her:

'Here we are at the end of August, Mary. The tradespeople will be bringing their monthly bills, and very possibly at times like the other day, when my hands are in a pickle, or I am away from home. Do you take this key, my dear, that you may pay 'em as they come with the cash you will find in the corner drawer.'

'But you will let me go with you this morning to see the Lawsons, won't you?' she replied, taking the key with the utmost unconcern.

'To be sure. I will tell Morton to have the chaise at the door by ten, if that suits you.'

'Very well indeed, thank you,' said she, slipping the key on her ring.

In her look and behaviour there was not the slightest sign of suspecting my motive in giving her the key. Very likely she regards the taking of that note as a more trivial affair than it appeared to me; though, indeed, it is only the seeming stealth of the act which gave it any importance to me. However, as Fawcett would say, we've had enough about that.

We reached Higham Court a little before eleven—Mary as bright as a button, with the keen expectancy in her look of a gambler taking a hand of cards for a big stake, and

looking wonderfully pretty withal, to be sure. We were shown into the drawing-room, where we found Mrs. Lawson sitting alone, and at the first glance I perceived that Mr. Lawson had not exaggerated her case. She was bent as though she had an actual burden to support, and her face was so careworn and full of trouble that she looked quite ten years older than when we saw her last. But she received us with unfeigned pleasure, seeming to recognise that we were real friends, upon whose sympathy she might rely; and this I noticed after a little while was especially the case in her regard for Mary. This does not surprise me, for when one considers how instantly a mere child, or even a dog, recognises those who feel true kindness for it, it is evident that some subtle intelligence is conveyed from one mind to the other which the greatest art can only poorly simulate. I am certain that the

dominant thought in Mary's mind was, 'Whatever the mysterious burden is that weighs you down, poor soul! I will discover it and take it from your back;' and I am as firmly convinced that Mrs. Lawson read this unspoken message of love and comfort from her eyes.

I made the usual professional inquiries respecting her health as Mary's flow of gossip permitted, but failed to discover the determining cause of the sudden change in her condition at Whitby. In reply to some regret that I expressed, she said, shrugging her shoulders and with a little quivering of the lips:

'What does it matter, Doctor? I am an old, old woman. My course is nearly run.' And then, as if to change the subject, but in reality, I think, as a corollary to the foregoing reflection, she said: 'Let us talk of other things. Have you seen Harry since he came here?'

I was glad to hear her speak of him, and the more so as she spoke without constraint —indeed, with a certain amount of eagerness. I told her that he had spent a day with us quite recently, and never looked better in his life.

'He is working steadily and hard,' I added; 'harder, maybe, than his friends could wish; but he is still a young man, and has the strength to rough it.'

'Can you tell me what he is doing for his living?' she asked.

'Yes, ma'am; he is working at the bench in a cabinet-maker's workshop from bell in till bell out for forty shillings a week.'

I felt that I must tell her this in justice, for she was not the only one suffering unjustly who deserved consideration. And this she clearly felt, for, bowing her head, she strained her clasped fingers on her lap in seeming contrition.

'May I come one day when you are quite

alone and talk about him?' Mary asked, in a low voice, bending towards her. 'I want to tell you how he saved an unhappy woman from despair, giving all that he had to make her better than she was. May I come?'

'Yes, yes,' she answered quickly. 'One day when I am quite alone;' and then, raising her head in a listening attitude, she put her fingers to her lips. At that moment we heard Mr. Lawson's voice on the stairs. Mrs. Lawson's left hand had fallen by her side; I saw Mary take it in hers for a moment as she exchanged a rapid glance of intelligence with the poor old gentlewoman.

Mr. Lawson entered the room, followed by Olive in her walking dress. Mr. Lawson was effusively pleased to see us, and apologized for his absence at our arrival. He had been with Olive for their constitutional walk —it was so indispensable to her health, a little exercise in the morning.

I looked at Olive as we shook hands.

Yes, certainly the sea-air and the change have improved her appearance. She is browned by the sun, her cheek is fuller, there is more animation in her face. And her eyes are brighter, but there is something new in their expression that displeased me. They did not meet mine with their customary steadfastness; there was a baffling look in them, as if she could not bear my scrutiny; almost awkwardly she turned away from me to go to her mother, by whose side she seated herself. Mr. Lawson engaged me in conversation, turning with timid temerity (if I may use such a contradictory term) every now and then to Mary not to be remiss in gallantry. But this did not prevent my keeping an eye on Olive and her mother, whose behaviour I wished to observe. And their behaviour was difficult for a man of my simple ways to understand. Mrs. Lawson's attitude was repellent—precisely what her husband had led me to expect. Olive's

manner betrayed a strange compound of pity and conciliation, of humility and tender affection. Telling her mother about their walk, she laid her hand gently on the old lady's arm. Mrs. Lawson put her hand away, and, shrinking back, moved her chair further apart. Olive carried a few wild-flowers. 'See, mamma,' said she, 'we found these in the wood!' and she laid them on the little table before her mother. I feel sure they had been gathered and given to her by her stepfather, for the stems were neatly bound together with a long blade of grass—a thing no girl of Olive's temperament would think of doing. This did not escape Mrs. Lawson's observation. She looked at the bound stems—perhaps he had bound wild-flowers thus for her once; then she lifted her eyes, and, with cold, hard accusation in them, fixed Olive's wavering regard. From her she glanced at her husband, now talking with benign suavity to Mary, and then (Olive

having turned to lay down her gloves) she dropped the flowers on the ground and crushed them under her foot.

Mary and Mr. Lawson were now discussing Sunday-schools, and as he said, 'Oh, Miss Smith, if we could only persuade you to take a class, what a great achievement it would be!' I saw Olive shoot a glance of apprehension at them, and from that moment she ceased to pay the slightest regard to her mother. Mary was adroitly diffident about teaching at the school, letting Mr. Lawson take the initiative. She unhappily knew nothing about Sunday-schools, only she did love little children, and did so wish to be of some little use in this world. Here she assumed the most serious expression as she looked earnestly in the susceptible gentleman's face with her soft beautiful eyes.

'You must let me instruct you, my dear Miss Smith,' he said, blushing like a boy.

'Do pray tell us when we may come and talk about this interesting matter, and make our arrangements for this good work.'

Mary turned to me appealingly in silence.

'My dear,' said I, 'you have my hearty sanction to take a class, and with regard to making arrangements, why, what do you say, sir, to coming to supper with us on Sunday next, as you did before?'

'Nothing could be more agreeable to me,' Mr. Lawson protested; 'nor to you either, Olive,' he added, turning to her. She coldly assented to this proposition; then, rising, we said good-bye to Olive and Mrs. Lawson. Outside the door I remembered that I had not asked Mrs. Lawson a question relative to Dr. Muller's prescription, and turned back. Olive was standing beside her mother with an abstracted look, and as I spoke to Mrs. Lawson, she said:

'I will go and take my things off, mother,' and left the room.

Mrs. Lawson replied hurriedly to my question as she crossed the room. She opened the door softly, and stood there looking across the landing with a sardonic smile on her face. Following the direction of her regard, I perceived Olive on the lower stairs, still with her hat on, and listening. A ripple of laughter came up from below. It was Mary who laughed, and at the sound Olive craned forward to look down at her.

'Already,' murmured Mrs. Lawson, retiring to her room. Olive faltered some unintelligible excuse, and ran upstairs when she saw me.

Mr. Lawson was looking very sweetly at Mary; his face was quite shiny and moist; and his customary presence of mind forsook him as I approached. He must have been saying something very foolish at that moment—certainly his manner and look bore out that supposition. However, Mary's per-

fect tact revived him, and by the time we had crossed the hall he had so far recovered his equanimity as to remember the book he borrowed of me yesterday. He fetched it from the library, saying that he had copied out the article relating to his grandfather, and had marked the place with a piece of paper that I might read it.

'I don't know whether you know it,' said he, opening the book with a grave shake of the head, 'but some malicious person has, I fear, been mutilating the volume;' and with that he showed me three places where paper had been torn out.

'It doesn't matter in the least,' said I, 'for no one will ever want to read the lost pages;' but, at the same time, I wondered whether Mary had taken those pages out, or whether he had—and why.

When we were at a safe distance from the Court, Mary said:

'Will you let me look at that book?'

'Certainly, my dear,' I replied, giving her the book.

She opened it at the torn parts. The book contained six monthly numbers, and three pages were gone from three successive months. I noticed this as Mary examined the volume. Then, as she quietly turned to the end of the book, and pointed to a ragged edge, which showed that another page had been torn out of the index, her face lit up with a smile of exultation, and she cried, as if by the uncontrollable impulse of triumph :

'I know now that I am right.'

'I will ask you only one question, Mary,' said I, unable to master the curiosity excited by this strange incident. 'Do you know what those missing pages contained ?'

'Every word of them,' she replied. I coughed, for this only mystified me the more, but I dared not ask a second question. Seeing this, she smiled, evidently enjoying

my perplexity, and then, after a moment's consideration, she added, 'They contained the report of three lectures given by Dr. James Braid.'

Now, who on earth, I should like to know, was Dr. James Braid?

CHAPTER XXI.

SEPTEMBER FOURTH TO SIXTH.

I HAVE been greatly exercised these last three days by the events I jotted down at length on Thursday night, and this evening has furnished fresh matter for speculation.

The conduct of Mr. Lawson and Olive leaves me but little doubt as to the accuracy of Fawcett's prognostication, which up to now I have regarded as incredible and ridiculous. He prophesied that Lawson, having persuaded his wife to dispose of her fortune in such a way that St. John cannot dispute the inheritance, will kill the mother and marry the daughter. Unparalleled as this crime is by any that I have ever heard

tell of, it seems to me now not only a possible but a probable eventuality. One stage is already reached. By some power of fascination known only to himself, Lawson has succeeded in exciting a passion in Olive's breast as unnatural as it is reprehensible. If he is capable of this villainy he is capable of any other, and granting that he is a crafty villain, it is in keeping with that character that he should make sure of winning Olive before destroying his wife. As Fawcett pointed out, he has the means of killing her at any moment by producing a state of syncope, and abstaining from the application of a restorative. In this manner he may rid himself of her with perfect impunity. The crisis through which she passed at Whitby was presumably the result of her first discovery of Olive's monstrous infatuation ; for no observer seeing what I saw on Thursday could doubt that there is a liaison between Olive and her stepfather, or that Mrs.

Lawson knows it. There was scarcely an attempt on her part to conceal the horror and animosity inspired by her daughter's conduct—indeed, both she and Olive appear to have lost all control over their feelings—and that is not the least curious feature in this case.

What is the secret of this man's diabolical fascination? I feel sure that the knowledge of that is the key to the mystery. The power of exciting intense passion would explain all that has perplexed us since the death of Colonel St. John. Under the influence of love a woman ceases to be a free agent; she obeys the will of the man who inspires her passion (more or less in accordance with the intensity of her feeling), and he sways her destiny. But what is there in Lawson to excite love? Ungainly, ugly, lacking in wit, delicacy, and true feeling, he has none of the qualities which win a woman's admiration. Was the source of

his power revealed in the pages torn from that book he borrowed? Mary's exclamation led me to believe that there must be some connection between those lectures and Lawson's secret; and with this in my mind I ransacked my bookshelves for further information respecting James Braid. Unfortunately, most of my books are of a still earlier date than the 'Medical Examiner' for 1843, and finding no immediate answer to my question, I began to doubt whether she had told me the exact truth (so mischievously does the knowledge of evil lead one to suspect the innocent)—whether she herself had not torn out those pages to keep me in the dark respecting her project, and invented the name of this doctor to mislead me. But, happily, this unjust suspicion was upset, for in looking through a file of old medical papers for 1844 I came upon the advertisement of a work by Dr. James Braid, entitled 'Neurypnology.' This, however, threw no

light upon my inquiry, for, as far as I can make out with my poor knowledge of Greek, Neurypnology means nothing but the science of nerve-sleep. What can that have to do with Lawson's occult influence over these two unfortunate women? More than once I have been tempted to break through all reserve and boldly question Mary on the subject. But a sentiment of delicacy has overruled me, for I cannot think of the horrible subject without repugnance, and it seems to me a most unfit thing to discuss with a young woman. Moreover, I am convinced that, question as I might, I should never get any answer from Mary upon a matter which evidently she thinks it better to be silent upon.

Surely no man was ever so plagued by conscience as I. I know not what to do. To watch the perpetration of a crime and make no effort to avert it is abominable. Yet, what can I do? What could St. John

do, if I imparted my suspicions to him? Nothing—absolutely nothing. On the contrary, by betraying this suspicion to Lawson, we might precipitate the very catastrophe that threatens us. And here I am forcibly reminded of the fable invented by Mary the other day in which she pointed out the danger of exposing her secret. And she was right; for I am such a poor hand at dissimulation that I feel it will tax my powers to the utmost to conceal my bare suspicion of his villainy from Lawson. I think I could not force myself to take that man's hand in mine if I felt absolutely sure of what I now only suppose. And then, what would become of that 'slender cord' upon which depends Mary's hope of delivering those we love from the fate that menaces them? That she holds 'the slender cord' I am fully convinced. I am not less hopeful that she will succeed. She is the one slight and agile traveller who alone can save the others, and

knowing what skill and tact are necessary to match the cunning of an accomplished villain, she is wise to confide in no one who might impede her action or betray her purpose by bungling efforts to assist.

She plainly intimated that this undertaking is fraught with tremendous consequence to herself; and Mary is not the kind of girl who would exaggerate her own importance. I am morally certain that she has already begun her descent into that terrible abyss, that she has taken an irretraceable step upon that path which may lead to nought but her own destruction; and yet, to judge by her behaviour in the past few days, one would say that nothing extraordinary had happened. She is just the same bright, clear-headed, amiable companion, going about her daily vocations with the same method and regularity, chatty and bright at our meals, observant and communicative in our strolls about the garden or through the lanes, and

delightfully sympathetic in our common taste for nature in the early morning and music after dusk. She gives herself no tragedy airs. Sometimes I find her at her needle, with a deep pensive cast upon her beautiful features; but, then, her habit since I first met her has always been reflective. And I have noticed that, fond as she is of music, she never sings to herself in the manner of light-hearted girls; but they, to be sure, may hum their snatches of song as the ploughboy whistles—from mere want of thought.

Mary went to church this evening, and as I knew Mr. Lawson would return with her, I schooled myself to receive him with a decent show of civility. I said to myself that a man must be considered innocent until he is proved to be guilty, that the evidence against him is wholly of a presumptive kind, that we might live to find our suspicions utterly wrong, and that for all we absolutely knew

to the contrary he may be the most injured of innocents instead of the greatest scoundrel unhanged, and so forth—in fine, I argued this matter so well in his favour that when he came to my door with Mary on one side and Olive on the other I greeted him with a smile only less bland than his own, and took his clammy hand in mine without a shudder. I observed, as I turned to Olive, that her dress was smarter than usual; but it failed to please me, and I should have liked her better in her old gown and prim little hat; for this note of gaiety jarred with the gloomy and almost morose expression of her face. In this, as in many other things, she suffers by contrast with my dear Mary, who never embellishes her pretty person with the slightest dash of colour or feminine ornament but that it harmonizes with some bright charm of manner or sparkling evidence of her lively disposition. And poor Olive seemed to be aware of her disadvantages, to judge by

her strenuous endeavours to outvie Mary's attractions. At supper she made an extraordinary effort to excite admiration by her conversational powers. But this palpable struggle to outshine Mary's wit was as futile as her attempt to eclipse her in the matter of dress, which scarcely reached the level of a poor imitation. Mary's repartee was natural, Olive's was forced, and her satire (for she chose to be sarcastic), lacking point, was simply spiteful, and to me a very distressing exhibition of ill-nature and bad taste. But her efforts were not made to captivate me ; they were solely directed at Lawson, with a view to taking the wind out of Mary's sails. And when they failed—dismally enough, for Lawson coldly reproved her once or twice for being foolish, and talking about things she did not understand—she lapsed into a moody silence, from which neither Mary nor I could draw her out.

This spirit of rivalry clearly arises from

her jealousy of Mary—towards the end of the evening she had barely the grace to answer her civilly — a jealousy caused by Lawson's growing admiration for Mary. Such a feeling could not exist unless she loved the man ; and, measured by the extent of her jealousy, that love has already attained the proportions of an over-mastering passion. The whole thing is horrible and astounding —not to be explained by any theory that my reason can furnish. I do not believe in sudden conversion, either of the wicked becoming virtuous or the good vicious abruptly ; yet here, within the space of a few weeks, a girl whom I have known from her infancy to be simple and honest, sweet and pure, has grown crafty and hypocritical, and heartless and depraved to the extent of coveting the love of her mother's husband !

When Mary had taken Olive upstairs to put on her things, I asked Lawson about his wife's health.

'I am happy to say,' he replied, 'that she seems very much more composed to-day.'

'Come, that is well,' said I; 'a wife—especially at Mrs. Lawson's age—is only really happy in her home.'

'You will never guess the cause of Mrs. Lawson's improvement,' said he, smiling and shaking his head gaily; and then, blinking his weak eyes—as usual when he seems doubtful as to how I may receive his statement—he continued: 'The fact is, Mrs. Lawson is happy because I promised to remove Olive.'

'Dear me, is it possible?'

'Perfectly, I assure you. Dr. Muller ordered that her caprices should be indulged as far as possible; and, seeing that the present arrangement is equally bad for both of the poor things, I resolved yesterday to send Olive away next week. I am having a little place at Maidstone arranged for her, and as soon as it is ready she must go.'

When I told Mary of this she shook her head, and said with a smile :

'Mr. Lawson has made a miscalculation for once. He should have removed Olive before ; it is too late now.'

'But if he has taken this cottage at Maidstone for her ?'

'It is one thing to take a cottage for her, and another to make her live in it. He may compel her to go there next week ; but all his power will not make her stay there while —well, while Mr. Lawson is so anxious to instruct me in Sunday-school work.' She laughed lightly ; then after a moment's silence she went on, with an earnestness the more impressive by contrast with the light tone of her last utterance : 'He must not take Olive there. That would be fatal. And he shall not take her there if I can save her, poor girl !'

* * * * *

I made my rounds of visits alone this

morning—Morton having all the pea-haulm to clear away, and that corner patch to dig up, and Monday always being a busy day for Mary. Just at the top of Mill Lane I encountered Mr. Lawson, looking wonderfully spruce for him, with a flower in his button-hole. He pretended to be vastly surprised and pleased at the coincidence of our meeting, but I verily believe he had been lying in wait (knowing my regular habits) with the hope of seeing Mary and giving her that tea-rose, and that he was not half so pleased as he might have been. He accepted a seat in the chaise and went with me as far as Borough Green, and all that distance he talked of nothing but Mary, her wit, her beauty, accomplishments, etc., putting many indirect questions with a view to learning who she was, how connected, and so forth. I managed to parry them so skilfully that, finding he could gain nothing obliquely, he went straight to the point by asking me

plump if she was related to me, and as this necessitated a straightforward reply, I answered that though we were not akin by blood, I regarded Mary as my sister, and as a brother I should cherish her as long as I lived.

'You are a happy man, Doctor,' said he, 'a very happy man. It does not arrive to all of us to have a companion so free from the faults of her sex ; a companion so—so—' he hesitated for a word, and then with fervour said : 'so delicious.'

There was not much in the expression itself to carp at, but the hungering look that accompanied it made the expression repulsive to my feelings.

'Miss Smith must have a great many admirers,' he said presently, after a pause, and with a forced smile.

'Why, yes, there are a good many young fellows about here who would be glad to take her away from me, I dare say.'

'And one of them will succeed, no doubt.'

The smile on his cadaverous face seemed less assumed as he said this, leaning forward slightly, his elbows on his knees, and his eyes fixed on the distance. Anything vile might have been passing through the brain behind those half-closed, fishy eyes. He might have been meditating a change in his scheme; of inducing Mrs. Lawson to alter her will—a very practicable possibility now—of throwing over Olive, putting an end to his wife, and setting my dear Mary in her place. With this suspicion in my mind, I replied:

'I am not so sure of that. She has told me that she will never marry, and she is not one to say such a thing lightly, and without premeditation.'

'It isn't in her nature to become an old maid,' said he, with conviction. 'She has too much life and passion in her for that. You can see it in her eyes; too much wisdom, also, to rest content with the chief

end of her being unaccomplished. Has she told you why she objects to marriage ?'

'No,' I answered curtly.

'Maybe she thinks that love cannot exist in fetters, even when they are of roses.'

'I don't know anything about that, sir,' said I, with still more displeasure in my tone.

It was soon after this that, thanking me for giving him such a pleasant half-hour, he got down, and I was heartily glad to be rid of him, for the presence of the man was more nauseous to me than that of an unclean beast.

We went for our evening stroll, Mary and I, along the Gravesend road. At the edge of Molton Copse some hoppers were encamped, and on a bank a little apart lay a woman with her arm under the neck of a sleeping child. She raised her finger appealingly, as if telling us not to wake her bairn. We nodded and stepped lightly, and, coming nearer, stopped to look at the little

sleeper. It was a dirty little boy, not at all pretty, and the mother was only a common costermonger's lass; but the picture was beautiful, for all that.

'We've walked from Stepney,' whispered the woman, 'and the little chap has done his twelve miles like a man.'

The look of love and pride glorified her scarred face, and as we went on I saw a tear on Mary's face.

'Why, my dear,' said I, 'the trudge will do them no harm, and you can see that the woman is supremely happy.'

'Yes,' said she; 'that is what makes it so touching, I suppose. There can be no greater happiness than that.'

Ah, my poor Mary! if this joy should never be yours, 'tis from no pernicious doctrine of materialists, no calculating fears of the thorn within the rosy fetters.

* * * * *

I could take my oath it was Lawson's felt

hat I saw over the hedge when I turned the corner of Mill Lane this morning. From that point he could see me come from the yard, and perceiving that I was alone, he obviously stayed there to escape observation, as he thought. I am so certain of this, because, when I returned, Mary told me that he had called soon after my departure. I was struck by the puerility of this man's behaviour; but surely the mean shifts of dishonest persons betray a weakness of mind and courage, and a low order of intelligence that would be contemptible even in a child. Such despicable dodgery points conclusively to the dishonesty of his character and consciousness of evil purpose, for if his feeling towards Mary were simply honest admiration and interest, such as any man, married or not, might entertain for a charming young woman, he would not be ashamed to be seen near the house, nor take advantage of my absence to call upon her.

'Well, my dear,' said I, 'and what had Mr. Lawson to talk about?'

'I don't know,' answered Mary; 'I was not at home.'

'Why, where were you, then, Mary?'

'Dusting your room,' said she demurely.

'Hum! I feel pretty sure he saw me go out alone, so he must have known that your "not at home" was a—a——'

'Another *façon de parler*,' said she, helping me out with a word. 'Well, I wished him to think that.'

'Ah, I understand—his attentions are unpalatable to you. You wished to discourage him.'

'Oh, no, no, no! Quite the reverse,' said she, laughing.

'Then, upon my word, I can't see why you sent the man away.'

'Can't you?' she asked archly. Then, calling lame Jack, she took up a pebble from the path, and put it under her dainty foot.

Jack at once became eager to get it, thrusting his nose against her toe and sniffing violently, then tearing at the ground to undermine her foot. The harder she pressed the pebble down, and the more she thrust him away, the more furious he grew to get it.

'Now do you understand?' she asked, removing her foot, and suffering Jack to seize the stone.

'You intend to treat him like a dog—is that it, Mary?'

'Like a dog,' she replied in a low tone, bending her brows.

'Even to letting him get ultimately what he covets?'

'Why not, if what he covets is worthless?'

'Worthless in whose esteem, Mary? If that had been a diamond, and not a mere pebble from the path, 'twould be all one to the dog now. Look, my dear,' said I, not unmoved by the terrible forecast that presented itself to my mind as I pointed to lame

Jack, who had dropped the stone the moment after he had got possession of it, and was now stretching himself out in the sun to sleep, 'the thing he coveted is forgotten already. There is a homily in this.'

'Oh, you poor lame Jack!' she cried, dropping on her knees with girlish impulsiveness to caress the dog. 'If you only knew the shameful use we are making of you—imputing wickedness, and greed, and heartless indifference to you, whose doggy nature is made up of honest love, and playful fun, and never, never ending fidelity.'

CHAPTER XXII.

SEPTEMBER TENTH TO TWENTY-FOURTH.

YESTERDAY afternoon Mary received a letter from Olive St. John. She put it into my hand, and I read it through with no little surprise. It began 'Dearest Miss Smith,' and ended 'Yours most affectionately, Olive St. John,' after begging Mary in the most pressing terms to come to the Court and take tea with Mrs. Lawson and her this afternoon.

'What do you think of that?' asked Mary, as I refolded the letter and handed it back to her in silence.

'Oh, go by all means, if you wish to, my dear,' said I.

'Yes, I will go. I particularly wish to see Mrs. Lawson. But I want you to tell me what you think of the letter.'

'To tell you the truth, Mary, it perplexes me. For Olive's manner on Sunday night when she left us was so far from amiable that the affectionate tone of this invitation—her abrupt change of sentiment——'

'Change?' said she, interrupting me, with a little laugh; 'there is none. Look at the letter again.' She spread it before me. 'See, there is a little stab every time the pen touches the paper, as though she were driving it into my very heart. Her hand shakes with passion as she writes this lie—"Most affectionately yours."'

'Then why does she invite you?'

'Because Mr. Lawson made her do so.'

'Do you believe he dictated the letter to her?'

'Every word.'

Improbable as they seemed to me then, I

have no doubt now as to the accuracy of her conclusions. She went this afternoon to Higham Court. Mr. Lawson brought her home, and Olive accompanied them. Even in the dim twilight the hatred in Olive's eyes was visible, as with dull obstinate persistency she watched Mary's every movement. Passion seemed to have choked the current of her blood; her face was colourless, her hand icy cold. From her arrival to her departure she said not one word except 'Good-night,' and that solely to me. It was only at a gesture made by Lawson that she forced herself to give her hand to Mary, and then, in her fixed eyes and the hardened lines of her face, there was an expression that appeared to me absolutely murderous.

Lawson also was under the influence of passion, but of another kind. Awkward as a bashful school-boy, he stumbled through the ordinary commonplace topics of conver-

sation with a thick and feverish voice, the everlasting sickly smile on his face, and his eyes continually stealing furtive glances at Mary. He lingered on the threshold, hoping by that means to be invited to stay; but, taking advantage of his lack of courage, I firmly ignored the unexpressed wish, and let him stand there till he could not in decency stay any longer. He said good-night, and still clung on to us that he might have an excuse to take Mary's hand again, and having it in his sticky grasp, he found something else to say in order to retain it yet another moment or two. The hungering, wolfish look in the man's face and attitude as he stood thus would have been absurd, if it had not been revolting, and I said to myself: 'Well, if you have the art to make some women mad, there is one, at any rate, who has the power to make a fool of you.'

Mary betrayed no repugnance to the man while he was there; but when we went into

the evening-room, where I had a cheerful fire burning and the candles all ready to light up for a little music, she carefully peeled her glove off, and taking it by one finger-tip, as if it were something unclean, she dropped it in the flames with a little *moue* of disgust.

Looking through my notes of the past fortnight, I find them chiefly devoted to the progress and development of Mary's extraordinary design. And truly she has conducted this business with such consummate skill and self-command as not one girl in ten thousand could have exhibited. In this I am reminded of those delicate surgical operations which require a firm yet sensitive hand, and an instinctive and unerring perception of appropriate ways and means that, maybe, not three men in the whole world possess. The two cases are analogous in another respect—which is, that the details

of both are unpleasant to dwell upon; I shall therefore pass over the incidents of these past fifteen days as lightly as I may in consistence with my purpose of showing how a certain result has been obtained. One morning soon after her visit to Higham Court Mary said to me:

'There is to be a concert at Maidstone next Monday; do you intend to go?'

'Why, I have not thought about it, my dear,' said I; 'but if it would please you to go——'

'I should like to; and if you do not particularly wish to take me, Mr. Lawson shall.'

'Has he offered to take you, Mary?'

'No; but he will,' she answered quietly.

'Let it be as you please, my dear,' said I, with the best grace I could muster. But I was a little piqued by her preference (being an old fool), and I think she must have perceived this, for, slipping her hand under my arm (we were in the garden), she said:

'For you and me, dear, Nature has more charms than art, and so the first fine day you have to spare we will go out just as far as Bess can take us, and lunch at a country inn and loiter in pleasant places till twilight falls.'

Lawson is not the only man she knows how to win. For a quarter of an hour we talked about this little outing, and she with as much enthusiasm as I. But for all that she had not lost sight of the great purpose that seems now to be part of her life; for after a break in our pleasant scheming, she said: 'We have not called on the Hardings lately.'

'I could go round by The Moat to-morrow, and you can come with me.'

'I will, if you please. And if I could only get an invitation to go there on Saturday——'

'Why especially Saturday?' I asked.

'Because I half promised to go to the Court.'

'I understand—you don't want too much of a bad thing: Mr. Lawson on Saturday and Monday as well.'

'It isn't that. But the course of true love must not run too smoothly. If I go to The Moat on Saturday he will feel horribly slighted and be abominably jealous.'

'That will make it rather unpleasant on Monday, won't it?'

'There's Sunday to come between. We can have a splendid quarrel coming home from church, and on Monday the reaction will set in, and he will be—ugh!' (with a little shudder) 'worse than ever.'

It is in this way she has plagued him the whole fortnight, keeping him in a perpetual ague of alternating hot and cold fits, giving him no peace, no two days alike. The marvel to me is how he stands it; but I suppose that is because I have never been afflicted with this fever of love.

All fell out exactly as Mary had planned.

She seems a perfect little witch in these matters. Of course the Hardings invited her to come again, she was so perfectly charming with them, and of course she found that she had no day disengaged except Saturday. On Saturday she went there. About an hour after her departure Mr. Lawson came, quite pale with anxiety, to know if Miss Smith was ill.

'Ill!' I exclaimed, with a hearty laugh, feeling a very malicious pleasure in discomforting the man. 'Lord bless you, no! Never saw her better or brighter in my life.'

'Oh, I'm so relieved, so pleased!' said he fervently, 'for she almost promised to come and take tea with us this afternoon.'

'That's very odd,' said I, affecting surprise, 'for she accepted an invitation from Ightham Moat last Wednesday, and she went not an hour ago. The Hon. Mr. Fitzurse and Mr. Harding came in their smart turn-out to fetch her.'

He went away—a kind of green putty colour with jealousy and spite.

And the quarrel came off on Sunday. I met them coming home from church — Lawson livid and shivering with furious anger, Olive flushed with joy, Mary calmly indignant. Lawson came no further than the gate, and said 'Good-night' with formal coldness. But an hour later a boy came from the Court with a letter for Mary—the most servile, grovelling effusion that ever an abased creature penned. He heaped opprobrium on his own head, and implored Mary's forgiveness.

'My dear,' said I, when Mary had sent the messenger away, saying there was no answer, 'we had better put this in the fire.'

'Not for worlds,' said she. 'This is what I have striven for. But we must have more.'

Another letter came the first thing on Monday morning, to which Mary vouchsafed

a brief reply, and in the afternoon, with that small shred of comfort, Lawson arrived, radiant with happiness, to take Mary to Maidstone. Soon after their going Olive came.

'I have come to see Miss Smith,' she said, regarding me with terrible suspicion in her poor worn face.

'My dear,' said I, 'she is not at home.'

'Where is she?'

'She has gone to Maidstone.'

'With papa?' she asked, in a tone and with a look that seemed to defy me to prevaricate.

'Yes,' I replied.

'I knew it,' she exclaimed, 'though he lied so well.'

And without a word she went out. It was raining then; she had no umbrella, and was already wet.

Lawson brought Mary home about eleven. Five minutes after he had left the house

there was a ring at the bell, and Morton opening the door, Olive came in, the most deplorable figure it is possible to imagine. Her clothes clung to her shivering body ; she was drenched to the skin ; her hair had come unknotted, and one yellow tress hung down her back ; her features were distorted with fury ; she looked positively mad. What she said to Mary I do not wish to remember. They were the words of a woman beside herself with jealousy and hatred. She accused Mary of such atrocities as I could not have thought it possible for a young girl to conceive. Every endeavour of mine to pacify her fury was unavailing, and it only subsided when her strength was exhausted. She left the house abruptly, and Morton, whom I sent after her, failed to overtake her on the road to the Court ; but he brought back word from Mr. Lawson that she had returned.

Mary said nothing to vindicate her own

character. Her attitude was entirely passive ; but ineffable pity suffused her face as she stood there listening to those vile accusations levelled at herself, and looking at the poor wretch who vituperated her, and the moment Olive had gone she sank down in a chair, and, covering her face with her hands, wept silently.

'I'm afraid, my dear,' said I, 'that we have gone too far.'

'No,' she said, wiping away her tears, 'I must go further still. The turning-point is not yet reached.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

SEPTEMBER THIRTIETH TO OCTOBER TWENTY-FIRST.

On Tuesday Lawson called in my absence to see Mary. She declined to receive him, and in consequence he sent a letter to her by hand in the afternoon. She handed it to me without comment. Ostensibly it was an apology for Olive's outrageous conduct of the preceding evening, which he said she had confessed to him with contrition and remorse; but in reality it served merely as a vehicle for an almost open protestation of love for Mary and a whining appeal for pity and sympathy.

'My life is rendered well-nigh unendurable

by the incurable insanity of my unhappy wife and her daughter,' he wrote. 'You have but an occasional glimpse of the fearful scenes to which I am daily subjected. I do not repine at this visitation, which doubtless is directed by the Divine will with a beneficent end; but if I turn from the tomb to the flowing mead, if I raise my eyes from this pit of darkness to the starry heavens above, can you blame me? Mary, must not your sensitive heart be melted with compassion, and must you not feel that it is your heavenly mission to console me in my affliction, to cheer my desolate existence, and sweeten the bitter cup that I have to drain to the dregs?' and so forth through six closely-written pages of sickening balderdash. He concluded by imploring Mary to walk as far as the garden-gate after dinner, or only come to her window for a brief moment, that he might have 'the memory of an angel to chase the spectres from his

thorny pillow'—or some such drivel. Mary, I am happy to say, did not go into the garden; nor did she, to the best of my belief, show herself at her window, for when I peeped out of mine on going to bed I saw an umbrella shining in the drizzle pass slowly under the outside lamp, showing that Mr. Lawson had not up to then received any heavenly remedy to take home against the spectres of his thorny pillow.

On Wednesday evening Mary was to have attended the evening-class in connection with the Sunday-school; but, to my great satisfaction, she stayed at home. However, as I dreaded, about eight o'clock Mr. Lawson found courage to come to the house and ask to see Miss Smith. Mary received him in her own sitting-room, and what took place there I cannot tell; but I believe that she encouraged him, not only from the tone of felicity and sweet regret with which Lawson bade her good-night in the hall, but also

from her evident repugnance to discuss the details of the interview when he was gone. I learnt, however, that she had made it clear to him that all relations between them must be discontinued while Olive maintained her present menacing attitude of hatred and jealousy, and that Lawson had assured her that such a scene should not occur again, and that he would do his utmost to remove Olive's irrational jealousy and bring her into a more reasonable state of mind.

'And he will succeed,' said Mary in conclusion, with a smile of conviction.

In proof of this Olive came to us the next day alone, and apologized for her past conduct with every sign of perfect sincerity. It delighted me to see with what sweet skill Mary lightened the poor girl's humiliation, with what delicate playfulness she turned her tears to smiles, and how by her own expansive warmth and gentle breath she unfolded the closed petals of Olive's shrinking heart.

They kissed in parting, and Olive yet lingered, holding Mary's hands in hers, looking with tear-dimmed eyes intently into her face, as if she were seeking to discover there the secret of Mary's power.

But though all fear of Mary's resentment was removed, Olive seemed still apprehensive of my reproaches. Not once did she look me fully in the face, nor even lift her eyes to mine ; she faltered in replying to my simple observations, and even Mary's inducement added to mine could not persuade her to lengthen her visit and stay to lunch with us. And this seemed to me rather hard ; for Heaven knows I bear the poor child no malice (who could, looking in that careworn, haggard face ?) and have never, to my knowledge, spoken a harsh word to her.

'Well, Mary,' said I, when the carriage had driven off with Olive, 'is that turning-point reached yet ?'

She shook her head doubtfully.

'We have done something,' she said. 'Olive was to have been removed to Maidstone last week, and she is here now. And she will not go—obedient as she is to Mr. Lawson's will to-day. That is something.'

'It is something also that you have compelled the man to overcome, by some mysterious means, the frantic jealousy that possessed the unfortunate girl.'

'She is only jealous under the influence of passionate love for him. He has removed the spell, because it suited him to do so. But for how long? Till it suits his purpose to replace it.'

'What!' I exclaimed, in amazement. 'You believe that he has the power to make her love him or not at a moment's notice, and whenever he pleases?'

'I am sure of it,' she answered, in a calm tone of conviction.

'Well, this is more astonishing than anything I have ever heard of in actual exist-

ence. Of course we have read of such powers being possessed by wizards and witches in past times; but we know that witchcraft was merely a means employed by charlatans and impostors to dupe the ignorant and the foolish. We know that their so-called art was mere trickery.'

'Do we know that?' she asked, turning her grave, far-seeing eyes upon me. 'Because it was employed by unscrupulous persons for evil purposes, the power we call witchcraft may have existed then, and may, under another name, exist now. Are we justified in disbelieving anything merely because we cannot understand how it is done? Perhaps that very fact ought to make the thing more respectable to us who know how little we do know. We can communicate our thoughts from one end of the world to the other in less time than it takes to put those thoughts into words. That would seem more marvellous than any

miracle or feat of witchcraft that was ever performed, if we knew nothing about electricity. But this power can be used by good or bad alike for any purpose, and they are fools who can still doubt its actual existence.'

'What you say is perfectly just and true. I admit that you take a far more scientific and logical view of the question than I. Still, you know, my dear, witchcraft' — I made a wry face, shaking my head, and repeated with still more disgust—'witchcraft!'

'Call it by another name,' she suggested, a smile twinkling in her eyes for a moment.

The only other name I could find for it was 'humbug,' but I prudently kept it to myself, having no better explanation of Lawson's undoubted power to offer in the place of that she had put forth. Mary had become quite grave again, and presently broke the silence by asking me whether I had any

reason to think that Mrs. Lawson had altered her will.

'No, my dear,' I replied. 'She has not mentioned the subject to me, and if she had employed Fawcett to do it he would certainly have let me know. But it is not improbable that she herself has written another, seeing the changed feeling she has for Olive.'

'Oh, she will do nothing except at the wish of her husband,' she said, in the same confident tone as before.

'Even though she now despises him?' I said, in a questioning voice.

'Even though she despises him. He can change all that to-day, to-morrow, when he pleases. I do not think she has altered her will, and that is why I feel that the turning-point is not yet reached.'

'Could you explain the matter a little more clearly to me, Mary?'

'What is it that does not seem clear to you?' she asked, with such simple surprise in

her face that I felt quite ashamed of my density.

'Well, my dear, I don't quite understand what this turning-point is.'

'That is the stage when Mr. Lawson shall make a definite resolution as to the course he is to take. At present he stands between two stools, and fears to fall between them.'

'I see. You have upset his original calculations.'

'Yes. He could kill his wife and marry Olive in a few weeks, if he chose; but that——' She hesitated with a look of repugnance, and, turning to me, said: 'You must help me.'

'That would put an end to all hope of winning you?'

'He would certainly prefer to get rid of his present family, and make me his wife; but he is too cunning to drop the substance for the shadow, and there are difficulties in

the way. His resources are limited, and he knows I have no money.'

'How can he know that, Mary?'

'Oh, he has not been idle since he called at Arlingford Terrace the day I left. He may know more about me than you do, even. Never mind that. It is enough that he knows I am dependent upon you. Have you observed how anxious he is that I should go frequently to the Court?'

'Yes, my dear; but an explanation of that is not difficult to find.'

'And have you noticed that Mrs. Lawson is not less anxious to see me there, and displays an extraordinary affection for me?'

'Yes, I have noticed that; but I see nothing extraordinary in her liking you.'

'But it is extraordinary,' she insisted.

'I don't see it, my dear. For, independent of your being a most lovable little person, there is this to be considered—you have alienated her husband from Olive.'

'No; that does not account for it. A woman could never forgive me for taking her husband's affection even from another.'

'Come, Mary, you shall not make me believe that there is magic in this—except such witchcraft as you yourself exercise over all of us.'

She smiled acknowledgment of this little compliment, but still maintaining her position, she shook her head, and said:

'No; it is by her husband's wish. And he wishes it that she may have a plausible pretext in her love for me, and the unnatural conduct of Olive, for making a new will in my favour. That is what we have to fear—that is why I will not go again to see Mrs. Lawson. For if that will were made, and he believed I would be his wife, she would die, and Olive would be abandoned. You see, he is haunted by a dread of Mr. St. John throwing the estate into Chancery at his mother's death—a dread prompted very

likely by some hint he has received from a lawyer.'

'Could St. John dispute the inheritance?'

'Yes. I have made sure of that.' (It was to discover this fact, perhaps, that she went to London last month.) 'If she left her estate to Mr. Lawson, and undue influence could be proved against him; or if she left it to a stranger—me, for example—without sufficient cause, Mr. St. John could dispute it.'

'Believing this, Mary, is it quite wise to encourage Mr. Lawson?'

'It is the only way of preventing him from taking that other course—the only way of saving Mrs. Lawson and Olive.'

I drew a long breath; and then, after a little consideration, I said:

'Supposing we laid all this before St. John——'

'What can he do, poor Mr. St. John? He

has made an attempt, and failed. The next attempt might be fatal——'

'But could not the law be moved to protect these two wretched women?'

'What charge can be made against Mr. Lawson that would make a case for trial? And what jury would convict him of what you yourself regard as a sort of witchcraft?'

'But something must be done, my child. You cannot prolong the present state of things indefinitely.'

'Yes, something must be done, and quickly, for Olive's sake. Her system cannot bear the strain of such terrible passions.'

'I suppose you yourself, dear, scarcely see what it is that must be done?'

'Oh yes, I do,' she replied quite calmly. 'We must go further yet. Till Olive and her mother are beyond the reach of that man, they must be at his mercy. God help them!'

'And how do you propose to separate them?' I asked. She made no reply, and when I put the question to her again in another form, she raised her downcast eyes and said almost fiercely:

'Oh, do not ask me that—I cannot tell you.'

Our conversation on this subject ended there, and has not been renewed. It leaves me in a state of restless suspense. I am for ever on the lookout for some fresh development of Mary's scheme, without knowing in the least what I may expect. I can only see that she is employing all her tact and art to get Lawson more and more under her subjection. But now this inspires me with a fresh and most profound dread. For what, I ask myself, if, under a pretence of yielding to her wiles, this villain is subtly exercising his own arts upon her! What if he exercises that unnamed power of his to excite in her the same irresistible passion for himself

which has already unseated the reason of his wife and stepdaughter! It is not impossible, for the same influence that bears upon one may bear with equal force upon another. She herself, with her own purpose before her, is giving him every opportunity to play upon the secret springs of feminine passion. Is my dear Mary, in attempting to save others, likely herself to fall a victim—to be poisoned by the venomous reptile whose fangs she has set herself to draw? It may be that this notion is suggested by the fear—I pray Heaven it be nothing more!—but already I fancy there is a change in her. After her interviews with Lawson there are not (it seems to me) those signs of repugnance, of self-abhorrence, which I used to detect in her manner. Is she growing indifferent to the loathsome character of the man and the repulsive aspect of his addresses? And may not indifference verge into some kind

of intellectual excitement, and then insidiously grow into an actual pleasure? When I think of this and contingent possibilities I am horrified.

I am almost tempted to write to St. John, for even to save his mother and sister we could not suffer our Mary to throw herself away upon such a wretch as Lawson.

Where is Harry St. John? It is over six weeks since he was here, and we have not heard one word from him. More than once Mary has asked me if he has written, and there is a look of pain and trouble in her face when I say 'No.' I wish he were here. His presence might preclude the thing I fear — that self-abandonment of which Mary is only too capable in her devotion to his cause. And yet I tremble to think of the effect this knowledge would have upon him, for he would see as plainly as I that it is for his sake, to repair the consequences of his neglect, to relieve him

from a life-long burden of self-reproach, that she is prepared to sacrifice herself. Every time I meditate on these matters—and my mind is perpetually harassed by the surmises and fears they provoke—the fable by which Mary made her position clear to me in the garden comes back to my mind, and I find new meaning in it. The abyss she spoke of descending, the risk of destruction attending the descent, were they not a foreshadowing in her mind of the fate that I have now reason to dread will befall her? Did she not, with that remarkable prescience which distinguishes her, foresee the probability of her succumbing to the mysterious power of Lawson, from which she is attempting to rescue Mrs. Lawson and Olive? Was it not, then, to her a foregone conclusion that she must fall in saving them? With this dread harrowing my soul I am almost tempted to break down all reserve, and to use every effort I can command to dissuade

her from her purpose. Yet here, again, I am met by the emphatic assurance with which she closed the subject—the avowed determination to be deterred by no persuasion of her friends, to carry out the desperate attempt to save them, even though she had to throw herself over the edge of the precipice.

* * * * *

This morning a packet came for Mary by book-post. She took it into her room, and sat there reading all the morning. After lunch she returned to study it again. About four I peeped in at her open window, and, finding her still reading, I said, 'My dear, can you tell me what it is that interests you so deeply?'

She looked at me curiously for a moment or two without replying, then, rising, put the book in my hand. Turning to the title-page, I read, '"Animal Magnetism," by Alfred Binet and Charles Féré.'

At that instant the outer bell rang, and a minute afterwards we heard Lawson's voice in the hall. She snatched the book from my hand, and slipped it in her desk, locked it, put the key in her pocket, and took up another volume, all in less time than I have taken to write this, and before Lawson entered the room.

What was there in that book that she did not wish him to see? Does she hope to find in animal magnetism some power to counteract his 'witchcraft' on the homœopathic principle of one poison counteracting another? Surely, if she can believe in the one, she can believe in the other, which seems to me not a whit more respectable. If that is the case, I fear she has nothing but a broken reed for her support.

I remember some talk of animal magnetism when I was a young man—before I had given up fad-hunting and seeking to cure old ills by new remedies—and the subject has cropped

up at intervals ever since, though I have never thought it worth the while to read such nonsense. The so-called science was exploded long ago, and seems to have become the exclusive property of travelling showmen and electropathic quacks.

CHAPTER XXIV.

OCTOBER TWENTY-FOURTH.

Mary and I were working in the garden this afternoon, gathering the seeds from our fine dianthus, and putting them in little bags for spring sowing; and surely to have seen us so pleasantly occupied, vying with each other to get the finest heads, and chatting cheerfully about flowers (which my dear Mary loves as well as I do), one would have said we were two of the happiest and most light-hearted persons in the world—this being one of our happy days, as Mary says; we were thus engaged, as I said at the beginning of this rambling sentence, when Morton came across the lawn, and, presenting a card, said:

'The gentleman is a-waitin' to see you, sir.'

'Now, who can this be, my dear?' said I, reading the card: '"Mr. John Parsons, Salvador Chambers, Gray's Inn." I don't know that I've ever heard his name before; do you?'

'No,' said she, peeping over my shoulder at the card. 'A patient would hardly come from London without making an appointment, so it must be an old friend. At any rate, I will run upstairs and change my dress, in case it may be.'

'As you will, dear; though nothing can become you more than this sunny gown—show Mr. Parsons into my study, Morton—but as for me, I shall not change my garden coat for old friend or new.'

So saying, we crossed to the house, where Mary slipped in at her own window, while I entered my room just as Morton ushered in my visitor.

He was an elderly gentleman, very correctly dressed, with a shaven lip and chin, gray mutton-chop whiskers, and a thin wisp of white hair carefully drawn over the top of a very bald head. In one hand he carried a small black bag; in the other his hat.

'Dr. Harvey?' he said.

'That is my name, sir,' said I.

'I hope I am not putting you to any inconvenience?'

'No more than bringing me from my garden into this room.'

'Ah, you are found of gardening—delightful pastime! When I can spare a day from business, nothing pleases me more than to pass it amongst my own flower-beds.'

He seemed particularly affable and insinuating; but I liked him none the better for that, especially as I reflected that Mary was making herself smart for nothing, as this gentleman clearly did not know me even by sight.

'I had business in—in the—ah—neighbourhood,' said he, obviously avoiding stating the exact place, 'and I ventured to call with the chance of seeing you upon a little affair of rather peculiar interest.'

'Take a seat, sir.'

'Thank you.'

He seated himself with methodical care, placing his black bag within reach, and drawing off his gloves, continued:

'I am a solicitor, as doubtless you concluded from my address, and I am making inquiries after a young lady who has been missing since the—ah'—he opened his black bag, and took out a slip of blue paper (thus giving me time to collect my wits and put myself on the alert), and added, reading a note: 'since the twenty-fourth of May last.' I saw at once that it was Mary he was inquiring after, and I thanked our stars that she had left the garden and gone upstairs.

'One moment, sir,' said I, 'before we go

further. May I ask by whom you were directed to come to me?'

'Well, I—ah'—raising his eyebrows and shaking his head, but with the pleasantest smile—'I fear I am not quite at liberty to answer that question.'

'Very good, sir,' said I, adding to myself: 'If that's the attitude you take, Mr. Parsons, you need not expect to pump much out of old Dr. Harvey.'

'But I may tell you at once,' he pursued with serious emphasis, 'that this inquiry is of a strictly private and confidential nature, and is made solely with a view to the advantage of the young lady in question.'

I bowed to express a belief that he was acting with perfect sincerity, but I was not to be deceived by this pretended friendly interest. For had it been true, what necessity would there be for concealing the name of the person for whom he was acting? Moreover, I already had a strong suspicion as to

who that person was. Olive, St. John, and Mary were the only persons who knew that I was in the Wayford collision. It was impossible that Mary or St. John had communicated with Mr. Parsons; Olive, therefore, or Lawson, to whom she might have betrayed the secret, were the only ones who could suspect the identity of Mary. It seemed to me, then, not at all improbable that Olive had started this inquiry with a view to injuring her rival, and this belief was supported by Mr. Parsons admitting that business had brought him into the neighbourhood. Indeed, now I felt pretty sure that he had come over direct from Higham Court.

'I have many patients,' said I, with a view to throwing him off the scent; 'but, of course, I shall say nothing even with your assurance of friendly interest which may trench upon family secrets.'

'My dear sir,' raising his hand deprecat-

ingly, as though the wish to discover family secrets was farthest from his thoughts, 'you must give me credit for respecting the sanctity of professional etiquette. I shall ask you first one or two questions which I feel sure you can have no hesitation in answering. Now—ah'—putting his glasses on the bridge of his nose, and regarding his notes—'you were, I believe, at Wayford Station on the night of May twenty-fourth ?'

'Yes.'

'While you were there, did you by any chance see a young lady in the custody of two police constables ?'

'Yes.'

'Can you give me any description of her face ?'

'No ; her head was bent—she wore a lace shawl that concealed her features.'

'Subsequently you went on in the same train with this young lady, and were in the collision that took place ?'

'I decline to answer that question.'

'The newspaper report here says that a gentleman, who refused to give his name, but evidently of the medical profession, rendered invaluable assistance to the wounded passengers. We may take it for granted, I suppose, that you were that medical gentleman?'

'No, sir,' said I stoutly, struck by the coincidence of this information with Olive's words in meeting me at Wrotham Station the following morning. 'I do not admit the justice of your conclusions.'

'I understand your reserve, Dr. Harvey,' said he with a sly look. 'It does not do for professional men of our age to be suspected of coming home from the Derby, eh? Now, after the collision, may I ask if you saw anything of the young lady you had previously seen in the custody of policemen?'

'I do not admit being in the collision.'

'Come, sir, I will put it in another way. Will you tell me if you have ever seen the

face of that young lady since the collision?'

'I have told you that I did not see her face at the station. How can you expect I should recognise it afterwards?'

He shook his head slowly, smiling as if to say, 'You are a deep old customer!' then, diving again in his black bag, and fishing out another paper, he said:

'I think I can help you, Dr. Harvey. Here is a copy of the charge-sheet, taken from the inspector's book at the local police-station. Can you say if the description given here of the young lady corresponds with the appearance of anyone you have seen since?'

I rose and took the page, and reseated myself—as if to get more light on the paper—with my back a little more to the open window, partly to block out the view of the garden, where Mary might now be walking, and partly that the shadow might fall more deeply on my face, for I feared there might

be something in this charge-sheet which would affect my countenance. Then I put on my glasses and opened the folded paper with as much composure as I could muster.

It was tabulated thus :

Name.	Age.	Height.	Complexion.	Hair.
Refused.	*Refused.*	*5ft. 5in.*	*Pale.*	*Dark brown.*

Eyes.	Trade.	Parish and County in which Born.	Marks and Remarks.
Dark gray.	*None.*	*Refused.*	*Small mole on lower part of left cheek.*

Charged with murder and robbery. Gentleman found dead on Epsom Road, near Wingfield Holt, linen, etc., marked 'Hon. Clarence Spottiswoode.' Purse found on prisoner with silver initials C. S., and address card inside with above name, and £150 in gold and notes. £114 10s. in gold and silver found in prisoner's pocket loose.

I had much ado as I read this to control my agitation. For, prepared as I was to hear that Mary had committed a grave offence, I had not realized to myself the possibility of her being so deeply imbued with crime as this.

'Well, sir?' said Mr. Parsons, as I folded the paper.

'A dozen young ladies of my acquaintance would answer to that description,' said I.

'You can tell me if it tallies with the appearance of a young lady who for some time after May twenty-fourth lived with Mr. Henry St. John at Arlingford Terrace as his sister.'

'I was called in to attend to that young lady professionally, and I refuse to say one word with respect to her.'

'At least you will say if she is in any way related to a young lady now under your roof.'

'My lips are closed upon anything which may have reference directly or indirectly to any patient of mine.'

'I repeat that the discovery of the missing young lady is entirely to her advantage.'

'I do not question that. I simply refuse to answer any further questions on the subject,' said I, rising.

'One more, and I shall be satisfied,' said he, rising also, but facing me now so that the light fell upon my face. 'Have you ever heard the name of Veronica Vane?'

'Never,' said I.

'Thank you, sir,' said he, after looking me full in the face for a moment in silence. 'I believe you implicitly, and on the strength of that belief I shall advise my client to abandon the search. The police have already made an exhaustive inquiry, and have come to the conclusion that the poor young lady was burnt in the débris of the wrecked train. The only thing which at all shakes their theory is that the girl was in handcuffs at the time of the disaster, and no trace of them has been found. That is odd, because of course they could not have been destroyed or burnt out of recognition.'

Whether consciousness that those iron bracelets hung there in the corner cabinet within arm's reach gave me a look of guilty

knowledge, or whether my own suspicions were unduly excited by this fact, I cannot say, but I certainly fancied that Mr. Parsons fixed his penetrating eyes on me with considerable mistrust.

'That is very peculiar, to be sure,' said I.

'But not inexplicable,' he returned, shifting his gaze, to my great relief, from my face to the inside of his hat—'not inexplicable. Hundreds of people visited the scene of the disaster, and the rage to carry away mementoes of such accidents may have led someone to pounce upon those handcuffs as a curious relic. Yes; I shall advise my client to abandon the search. Good-afternoon, Dr. Harvey.'

I conducted him to the door, and we parted in the most amicable manner possible; but I feel perfectly sure that he has no more confidence in me than I in him; and that he has not actually the slightest intention of relinquishing the search for Veronica Vane.

CHAPTER XXV.

OCTOBER TWENTY-FOURTH—*Continued.*

I WENT back into my study to reflect on what I had learnt from my interview with Mr. Parsons—to compose my thoughts before meeting Mary, and to invent some explanation of this visit which should keep her in ignorance of the fact that she was being hunted down. The thing which obtruded itself in my mind before all others was this terrible charge against Mary. Look where I would, the tabulated copy from the police inspector's charge-book came before my eyes. But with this evidence of her guilt facing me, I found it impossible to realize the horrible truth.

'Mary a murderess and a thief!' I said to myself, as I paced up and down my little room; 'it cannot be.' And yet, when I grew calmer and reasoned about it, there was nothing outrageously improbable in the fact—nothing which circumstances had not already led me to partly conceive. The murder of this man might (if all the facts were known) prove to be virtually justifiable homicide; she might have dealt the death-blow in defence of her honour, or in sudden passionate resentment of a brutal insult. That, though legally a criminal offence on her part, for which justice might condemn her to life-long imprisonment, was morally a blameless act—a deed for which no man of sense and feeling could brand her with the infamous name of murderess. But coupled with the death of Mr. Spottiswoode was the discovery of his purse in her possession, and a sum of money which no woman, even of high position, would carry loose in her pocket.

That put a graver aspect on the case, and sapped the theory of outraged virtue. To rob a dead man, even though she had not intentionally murdered him, indicated callous sensibilities and base venality which could only belong to a person capable of premeditated crime. This robbery it was that seemed incompatible with the character of the girl I had come to love with all my heart. Still, here again I was faced by the fact that she had robbed me. Trivial as the losing of that note might seem, it was still a theft, and she had committed it with such *sang froid*, such a wonderful simulation of innocence, that nothing but circumstantial evidence could have betrayed her.

'Mary a murderess and a thief!' I said again to myself incredulously, as I walked to the window. Glancing down the veranda, I saw her at a little distance seated before her wicker work-table calmly working a strip of embroidery. She was dressed in her pretty

afternoon gown, her dark-brown hair neatly coiled upon her head, her sweet face bent over her work with an expression of perfect repose and tranquillity. Her needle moved with mechanical regularity—she looked the very picture of intelligent innocence, with such sweet, peaceful composure in her face and mien as Milton must have conceived in writing his 'Penseroso,' and yet from where she sat she might have heard every word that Mr. Parsons spoke.

Lifting her eyes from her work, she caught sight of me and smiled, looking me full in the face, and without a tinge of colour mounting to her cheeks.

'Is your visitor gone?' she asked, still smiling.

'Yes, my dear,' said I; 'a troublesome matter of business that will give me work till dinner-time.'

She shrugged her shoulders with a little air of regret. Then, with another smile

and a nod, she returned to her work, taking up the stitch with the same placid pensiveness.

As for me, I sat down at my desk to write up my neglected journal, with the hope that it would lead me to some more definite conclusions. But here am I at this moment as much befogged as ever. I say once more Mary is a consummate actress, a designing hypocrite, a murderess and a thief; but the words come from my head, and leave no more impression on my mind than a gust of wind might make upon a block of granite. In my heart Mary stands as a heroine—the truest and most devoted of friends, the sweetest and most lovable young woman in all the world; and, thank God! I have learnt to trust the guidance of my heart in preference to my head. For the latter is growing old, and may be a bit the worse for wear, but the former is, I feel, as young as ever, and the better for experience. And so now to meet

Mary at the dinner-table with a cheery face and an amiable disposition.

* * * * *

Surely 'tis a law of nature that everything shall come in batches. Never a drop of rain for the best part of a month, and then a flood ; nothing to chronicle for weeks, and then more news in a day than I can find time to note. Just as Mary and I were sitting down to table, in came Harry St. John. Surprise and pleasure took away our breath for a moment, but the next we rose to greet him with a spontaneous cry of delight. I had to stand for a minute a passive onlooker before I got a grip of his hard hand ; for, naturally, Mary was first in his thoughts. And as they stood there, he holding her hands in his, both were silent, but they looked into each other's faces with the pathetic yearning of dumb creatures, their eyes suffused with unutterable love. Flushed with happiness, he looked wonderfully well

and handsome, to be sure, and as the excitement of meeting subsided, we fell into gossip, he chatting in his old lively vein, with that undercurrent of kindness and good-feeling tincturing his mirth which I have noticed as a charming characteristic of Mary's conversation, and which, indeed, must be present in all discourse that is really pleasing. But later on in the evening, as he sat listening to Mary's playing, I observed how wofully he has fallen away in these past six or seven weeks, the cheek-bone standing out prominently as I never saw it before, and his eyes looking hollow and sunken to a degree ; the lines, too, in his forehead and at the angles of his eyes are more pronounced, and he has more than one gray hair on his head. Eh, well! he is no longer a lad—one cannot preserve one's youth for ever. I know all that ; but it seems to me that he is yet too young to wear these signs of time. He was not thinking of the music, as he leant for-

ward on the arm of his chair, unconscious that the cigar between his fingers had gone out, but of the beautiful girl who played, and, maybe, the strenuous worshipping, hopeless expression on his face gave it those signs of age and sad experience.

It was not altogether that, though—as I discovered when Mary left us, and we settled down to a serious smoke, with the whisky-case between us.

'Lots of work, Hal?' said I, opening the talk as I lit up.

'Just enough to be wearisome; not enough to prevent a man thinking of other things.'

'I thought you must be busy, as you haven't been down to see us for so long.'

He laughed harshly as he helped himself to whisky.

'It wouldn't have been difficult to run down,' said he; 'the tough job was to keep away—a tougher job than you imagine, Doctor.'

I made some comment—I forget what ; it passed unobserved, for throwing himself back in his chair, and clasping his knee between his knitted hands, as he looked up through the smoke that wreathed from his pipe, he asked me abruptly :

'How is Mr. Fitzurse ?'

'Mr. Fitzurse !' I repeated reflectively, that gentleman's identity escaping me for the moment. 'Oh, ah ! you met him, I remember, at the flower-show. He's very well, Hal. We saw him one day, not long ago, when we went over to The Moat, Mary and I.'

'Has he come to the point yet—are they engaged ?'

'Oh dear no ! The fact is, we have not been out quite so much since that affair at Sevenoaks. You see, Mary found some conscientious objections on account of her position, and shrank from accepting invitations which involved a sort of tacit deception

on her part. You know how squeamish some women are about that kind of thing.'

'Some,' said he, with a smile that told of his admiration of such women, whose virtues all were epitomized in Mary.

'No; they are not engaged, and are not likely to be,' said I.

'He seemed a pleasant, healthy, honest sort of man. I liked the look of him. Well, another as good may come forward. I hope he will—for her sake; a good, sweet, most lovable soul. But I would have liked'—he paused, as if questioning himself, and repeated, with emphasis: 'yes, I would have liked to see her married before I go away.'

'Before you go away, Hal! Why, what on earth does this mean?'

'Nothing much, Doctor. I'm going over to the United States, that's all.'

'And when are you coming back again?' I asked with anxiety.

'God knows,' he replied, but not flippantly.

'Going away, and in this spirit. You make my heart ache, Hal.'

'Forgive me, Doctor. I ought to have been more considerate.'

'I should have found it out—I should have found it out, my boy. I haven't been a practitioner for forty years to be cheated by a patient now. A man may bear up as bravely as he will, yet a symptom will betray his state to an observant eye. The signs are only too evident, my boy—they are there in your thin cheek and hollow eye. Come, tell your old friend all about it,' said I, drawing nearer to him and laying my hand on his shoulder. 'It's more than you can bear, eh?'

'If you knew the hell I live in—the infernal torment of this Ixion round of life! You will say that millions are content with the drudgery of such an existence, and that it is sheer childishness to whine at my lot.'

'Heaven forbid I should have so little

sense or feeling. Men are not all cast in the same mould, endowed with the same faculties, to be restricted within the same limits. There is no hard and fast line to govern the conduct even of brutes. One horse will never go in shafts, another is content to grind and feed in a mill from morn till night as long as his organs can assimilate the daily dole of oats. But this is not all, my dear boy. The seed of this disorder is lower down. The spirit of revolt against uncongenial employment would not of itself drive you to other countries for life-long exile. There are other means of subsisting in England here besides toiling in a workshop. A difficulty of that kind may be remedied, for its origin is in the intellect; but your trouble is here, dear lad,' said I, laying my hand on his breast—''tis in your heart. Am I too old to see the passion of youth? What, Hal, you love the maid upstairs—our dear Mary?'

He bowed his head in silence, clasping his hands between his knees. He pulled hard at his pipe, but it quivered in his lips.

'Tis for the best, Hal,' I continued after a pause, and not unmoved by the sight of this strong man's emotion. 'I will not oppose your going; but you will let me help you to make a footing in this new country.'

'Oh, that's all right, Doctor,' said he, grasping my hand gratefully. 'There's a shop for me in Boston. I'm to have I don't know how many dollars a week, and do pretty much as I like—till they can do without me. I am not likely to starve. You're right—it isn't the mere monotony of bread-getting that I find unendurable, it's the awful desolation of London when one is craving night and day for the companionship of one loved being. Everything seems so wearisome—every form of amusement worn old and threadbare. That must be changed. A new city and new mode of life necessitates

a change of ideas and fresh forms of distraction. And then we all have our Balaklava before us—a time when it is criminal folly to stand, a duty to all we love to beat a retreat. That time has come to me. The figure of Mary is before me night and day. The temptation to throw all aside —generosity, honesty, everything—grows stronger and stronger, my strength to resist weaker and weaker. I know that if I asked her to be my wife she would consent, though I had not a penny in my pockets, nor the prospect of keeping her from starvation, and the last shred of self-respect that restrains me from marring her future happiness may break down at any moment. I must go, Doctor.'

'Yes, Hal, if that is the case you must. When do you think of going?'

'Next Wednesday. I brought my tools from the workshop last night.'

'Next Wednesday? So soon?'

'Yes; make the plunge as soon as possible. I'll go up on Tuesday morning.'

I nodded assent, but I could say nothing. For all the old times came back, flooding my memory with cherished recollections. I saw this man, a bright, curly-headed, light-hearted youngster again—a boy, a youth, a chivalrous, high-spirited young man, in every stage a delightful friend. Thirty years of pleasant memories I looked back upon, and then I asked myself if I should ever live to see him again after next Wednesday. Is it all to end, then? Is there no hope of adding one happy incident of his life to my store of recollections, or is the tie that binds us together to be snapped as if by death?

'On Monday I should like, if possible, to make one more attempt to see my mother and Olive. Of course, if it may be done without danger to my mother,' he said, breaking the painful silence.

'I will see if that can be done, and let

you know by Monday morning,' I replied hastily.

We tried both of us to turn the subject then, but it was no use. Old times would keep cropping up in my memory, and I was powerless to keep them to myself.

'I'll finish that panel, Doctor,' said he when we were parting for the night.

And he must have been at it from daybreak by the progress made in it when I went up into my workshop with Mary before breakfast. And handsome it will be, to be sure; but, Lord! how my heart must ache when I look at it in times to come, recalling the past, and wondering what has become of that poor heart-stricken man thousands of miles away!

CHAPTER XXVI.

OCTOBER TWENTY-SEVENTH.

When I drew up my bedroom blind this morning to let in the sunshine and looked out as usual to see the face of nature, which to me is never so inspiriting as in the freshness of early day, I spied Mary's bright head beyond the arbutus hedge. 'She is gathering a dish of beans for lunch,' said I to myself, 'and I warrant Harry is hard by helping her—bending his broad back, maybe, to pick those less accessible to her.' But when I peeped out again he was still not in sight, and she turning her face at that moment showed so little animation that I saw plainly he could not be near. How was

this? I wondered as I slipped up the sash; and listening intently, the distant 'tip-tap' of a chisel reached my ear and explained the matter; he was at work on my panel. But the bench, facing the north, commanded a view by the side window of the garden where Mary stood, and he could have hardly failed to see her. Surely it was not indifference that kept them occupied asunder thus. Was it that he so doubted his strength under temptation that he dared not trust himself to join her in this innocent task for fear some involuntary act should betray his passion? Poor lad! thought I, if your love has grown to such overmastering proportions as that, your case is deplorable indeed.

I hastened down as quickly as I could, and, crossing the lawn, entered the kitchen-garden. Mary had gathered her basket of beans and was walking alone, her hands behind her, in the long path between the espaliers.

'My dear,' said I, saluting her, 'do you not hear St. John working up there?'

'Yes,' she replied; 'I have heard that horrid hammer for half an hour.'

'And do you take no interest in his work?'

'As much as he seems to take in mine. I've been gathering beans alone.'

'They being gathered, you could go up to Harry.'

'I preferred that he should come down to me,' she replied with vexation in her look and voice; then in her frank manner, turning to me, she added: 'and I am feeling slighted because he has not. We can see him from here; he must have seen me.'

'Why, Mary,' said I, smiling at her pique, 'this is not like you, to take umbrage at a trifle!'

She admitted it was a weakness, adding, with a sigh of impatience:

'After all, I'm a woman, and one cannot always be playing tragedy.'

Under other circumstances this token of girlish folly would have pleased me—for I misdoubt those who seem too perfect; but now it pained me as indicating a love that is never to bear fruit. However, I made light of it, and, passing my arm round her waist, told her we would soon bring Harry down by appealing to another sense.

'Hal!' I cried, entering the workshop with Mary, 'breakfast is waiting, and here is a young lady who feels slighted because you have let her walk in the garden alone under your eyes.'

'Did you think me churlish, Mary?' he asked tenderly, taking her hand.

'Lord! 'tis beautiful,' said I, examining his carving. 'You must forgive a man who can work like this. Do look at it, Mary.'

'I am too jealous to admire it,' said she, half in jest, half in earnest.

'Say but a word, Mary,' said St. John, taking up the mallet and laying the chisel

to his work, 'and I'll undo every offending stroke.'

I held my breath, for I knew well enough that he meant what he said, and would as ruthlessly destroy for her sake as he had lovingly created for mine. She saw that also, and kept me in terrible suspense for a minute as she looked into her lover's eyes with exultant gladness; then, catching sight of my rueful visage, a pleasant smile broke over her face, and she replied:

'If I had only my own pride to gratify, I would take you at your word, Mr. St. John; but I would rather deprive myself than give pain to Dr. Harvey.'

Going into the breakfast-room, the first thing that caught my eye was a rosebud in a glass beside the cream jug.

'Who's been cutting my Madame du Barry?' I exclaimed.

'I,' said St. John; 'it was the best I could find.'

'And the only one in the county,' I added regretfully.

'If I had come in here before going down the garden!' said Mary, with a glance of contrition at St. John.

Then, taking the bud from the glass, she bent down as if to smell it; but I saw her lips part as the cool petals touched them, and she did not return it to the glass (where it might have lived for a day or two), but placed it tenderly in her dress, where it must have faded in an hour, for she did not wear it at dinner-time. But did she cast it away? I think not. No, rather I believe it was laid carefully in some reliquary, ere its fragile petals fell, to be kept there, where its memory will never fade.

After breakfast, Mary having left us to attend to her domestic duties, St. John lit his pipe, and returned to the workshop, where I watched him with absorbing interest for a good hour; then, thinking

of Mary, and what disaster might follow a return of jealousy, I went down and pottered about the garden till she came out to me.

'Working again?' said Mary, catching the sound of the mallet.

'Yes, Mary; but I fancy he will have finished the job by lunch-time.'

'It is a strange way of spending a holiday, all the same,' she replied, raising her pretty eyebrows.

''Tis a labour of love, my dear. Sit down here,' said I, leading her to the seat under the sycamore. 'I think I had better tell you all about it now. He is finishing the panel for me, because he may never more have the chance of touching it.'

Her lip fell; she regarded me in silence, astounded by this unexpected intimation.

'Harry is going away from us. He leaves England next Wednesday for America.'

'But that is only a little way now—he will come back to us,' she faltered.

My lips refused to utter the word 'Never,' but their trembling, and the tears that sprang into my old eyes, betrayed my thoughts to her.

I expected her to weep, to break down under the strain, but she seemed dismayed rather than grieved.

'Next Wednesday,' she murmured, as if involuntarily expressing her thoughts. 'Have I gone so far, then, for nothing?'

What fiend was it that reminded me at that moment of her past offences, of her calculating foresight with regard to Lawson's motives, and the consummate duplicity with which she had worked her designs and kept him in hand? These recollections excited the base suspicion which I blush to confess, and led me to put a strange construction on those words of hers.

'Has she,' I asked myself, 'been scheming to defeat Lawson's villainy, and obtain a reversion of the estate to Harry, in the belief

that he will make her his wife? What else can those words imply: "Have I gone so far for nothing?" '

And at this her coquetry returned to my memory. Had she not tried to create a lovers' quarrel with Harry before breakfast on the same plan by which she fermented Lawson's passion, chilling him one day to make him the hotter to-morrow? How had she acquired these wiles if not from experience? And what did that experience imply? Honestly, I confess shame and regret for these suspicions—yes, honestly; for I will not believe that a heart so corrupt can exist in so beautiful a body as hers. Nature has given expression to our faces (as it seems to me) as a safeguard to the species, that others may know whether to loathe or love us rightly. This latter reflection came into my mind as I looked at Mary, now deeply absorbed in thought, and marked the perfect purity of her face, the absence from eye and

lips of anything remotely suggestive of vicious inclination or dishonest purpose, and the conviction restored my faith in her.

'Why is he going away?'—her eyes still fixed upon the ground.

'He is ill-paid in London. An opening has been offered him in America, where his merit will receive proper recognition.'

'Is that all?' she asked, raising her searching eyes to mine. She shook her head, and before I could answer, continued: 'You said he might never have the chance again of finishing that carving. You would have said, "He is going away from us for ever," but your heart failed. What other reason has he for going away—for ever?'

'He finds London unendurable. He hopes to begin a new life in a new world.'

'He must not go!' she said with intense earnestness.

'Why not? I cannot counsel him to stay.'

'Why not?' she exclaimed, echoing my

question. 'Because without him all efforts to save his mother and Olive will fail.'

'Shall we let him know——'

'Not one word,' she said emphatically, lowering her voice, and glancing across the lawn as if in fear of being overheard. 'You yourself know whether he is likely to tolerate a scheme which involves my connection with Mr. Lawson.'

'True; if that is to go on, he must not hear of it.'

'He must not guess it. You must not tell him even that I knew of his intention to go away. Promise me that.'

'Yes, Mary, I will promise if you think it necessary; but can you conceal the fact from him?'

'Oh, trust me,' she said, rising, her hands clenched with the resolution of her purpose. 'Will you excuse me for a little while? I want to think of this alone.'

I assented, of course, and went into my

study, there to think the matter out myself. About five minutes later Mary came in and asked if she might send Morton with a letter to Mr. Lawson.

'Certainly, my dear. Here are writing materials.'

She sat down and wrote a note under my eyes, and, having written it, read it over in a low tone, as if to let me know its contents:

'"DEAR MR LAWSON," she murmured,

'"Mr. St. John has come down to stay a few days, and as he meditates going away for some time, I shall feel bound to give all my time to him. I think it best to let you know this, as it would certainly be inadvisable for us to meet while he is here—at any rate, openly.

'"Yours,

'"MARY SMITH."'

I thought that matters must have gone pretty far between them for her to write

him in such terms as these, but I said nothing, and presently I saw Morton bustle off with the letter.

'The job is nearly finished,' said St. John, when he came in from the workshop a little before lunch-time; 'I've left just enough to keep me out of mischief to-morrow morning.'

'I should have thought you strong enough to hold your ground without such help as that.'

'Strong!' he exclaimed, with a contemptuous laugh, 'I am as weak as a child—just kept from falling by a frayed thread of principle that one false step may snap. I've been looking from the window all the morning with an excuse ready for throwing aside the chisel if she came again down the espalier path. Where is she?'

'Could we stretch out as far as Oldbury?' he asked at lunch.

Mary and I agreed that we could easily compass the distance, and should like to.

'It is our favourite walk,' said Mary.

'And mine,' responded St. John. 'I should like to see the old beeches again.'

There was a pathetic inflection of his voice which had a peculiar significance for me, and it was not lost on Mary, who said lightly:

'You speak as if you thought to see them for the last time.'

Her boldness disarmed suspicion; but it occurred to me that to speak like that required something more than the self-command of a born actress, and that she felt perfectly confident of her power to avert the misfortune she indicated. This was made more evident by her manner in the afternoon. The belief that we were never more to take this walk together made both St. John and me quiet; but Mary's spirits, rising to the occasion, prevented us from brooding, and dispelled the melancholy reflection that must

have come from time to time into his mind as they came to mine. We scrambled up through the cutting in the coloured sand, and, reaching the upper ridge of the amphitheatre, we seated ourselves under one of the giant beeches and looked down the steep slope, where the hoary lichen-covered rocks stood out abruptly from the broad sweep of bracken. It was here that St. John, as a lad, had searched with me for flint arrowheads, and built up romantic theories about the prehistoric men who made this place their camp. We talked of these bygone days and of the treasures we had unearthed. Mary listened with keen interest to these stories; she had read about flint implements, and could talk about them with intelligence—indeed, there are few subjects that she has not tackled in her omnivorous courses of reading—and presently, when there came a lull in our flow of recollection, she said:

'How I should like to find one little

arrow-head. Can you show me where to look for them?'

'Only too happy,' cried St. John, springing up with his old eagerness, 'if you are not afraid to venture on a roughish scramble.'

Mary declared that she feared nothing; but I, being already fatigued with the ascent, cried off. So they left me there, promising to return within half an hour, and I watched them going down the broken path, St. John in advance giving his hand to Mary, until they were hidden from my sight by the firs and bracken. Then I said to myself that I ought to have gone with them despite my exhaustion, my weak legs, and my back, for there was danger in that broken path that kept them face to face, hand-in-hand, their blood tingling with the exercise and the little perils of the way. But nothing happened to them then. When they came back St. John's face glowed with satisfaction, that told me he had triumphed over

temptation, and Mary's chief delight was in a questionable-looking flint which she had discovered in Hal's old hunting-ground. The dreaded event came later on—in the evening—and the merest accident precipitated the catastrophe.

After playing to us for some time, Mary turned on her stool from the piano, and, dropping her hands in her lap, bent forward, waiting, with a smile, in expectant pleasure for a 'good talk,' conversation being her great delight.

'You couldn't live without a piano, Mary, I should think,' said St. John.

'Why not? Thousands — hundreds of thousands do live without pianos,' she replied.

'Hundreds of thousands live without anything that is necessary to happiness,' St. John responded, with a touch of bitterness that gave his words a personal significance.

'Yes,' said I (with a side view to

strengthening St. John), 'certain things are necessary to human happiness, and music is one of them.'

'And so nature has given every one of us an organ more beautiful than any instrument the hand of man has made,' said Mary.

'Some of us, Mary,' I objected. 'I don't think I have ever heard you sing.'

'That only proves that for some reason of my own I have preferred to get music from a piano. But I can sing—I should sing if I had no instrument, and it gave pleasure to anyone to hear my voice.'

'You make me wish that I had not tuned the piano,' said St. John.

She smiled, and then, in a reflective tone, she said:

'Do you think happiness depends in the slightest degree upon external things?'

'Certainly it does,' said St. John, tentatively as I think.

Mary, smiling, shook her head.

'Undoubtedly,' I affirmed stoutly.

Still smiling, Mary shook her head again and said:

'I think happiness comes from within, not from without. Would there be any justice in heaven or earth if it were otherwise? Does not your argument doom every poor man and woman and little child to misery, and make happiness the exclusive possession of the rich? Does any fact support that terrible theory? Is the millionaire who can command all that money can buy supremely happy? I have not seen one, but I am told they are the most wretched of men. Do the people one sees in fine carriages look happy? Most of them seem to me poor, disappointed, dejected creatures. Is the laundress who works night and day to feed her brood intensely miserable? She seems the cheerfullest woman in the village. If happiness is not equally distributed, one would say the

balance was in favour of the poor. I should not mind being poor.'

'No, Mary?' questioned St. John, with an eager flame in his eyes.

'Come, my dear,' said I; 'since you seem to know so much about it, can you give us the secret of happiness?'

'You ought to know,' she answered, smiling —'you who go to church every Sunday.' Then, suddenly growing grave, she continued: 'The secret was given us nearly nineteen hundred years ago—longer than that, I have read. Our happiness in little things, just as much as in great things, depends upon the renunciation of those things which you consider essential—upon living a simple life—upon giving one's self, body and soul, spirit and heart, to making others happy.'

At this unlucky moment Morton came to tell me that Mrs. Gutteridge had called to see me. I cursed the woman and her rheu-

matism inwardly, despite the fine lesson I had just received, and went out to get rid of her as soon as possible. But she would not go, hint as I would, for fully ten minutes, and then, when I returned to the drawing-room, I dared not enter, for St. John was speaking in a tone of passionate appeal :

'Oh, Mary, if you would give happiness to a miserable man—if you would save his soul from damnation—be my wife.'

It was not for me to listen there. I went back into my room with the sense of a great calamity having fallen upon us.

CHAPTER XXVII.

OCTOBER TWENTY-EIGHTH.

I SANK down in my old arm-chair, overcome by the gravity of the crisis brought about by St. John's impetuous passion, and there I sat until the rustle of a skirt reached my ear through the half-open door, and the sound of Mary's quick step upon the stairs was followed by the entrance of St. John. Then I rose, and met him with a rueful look, for his flushed cheek and brilliant eyes told of triumph and feverish joy.

'You know what has happened, Doctor?' he said, closing the door. 'I have asked her to be my wife.'

'And she has accepted?' I asked.

'Not yet; but she will,' he replied confidently. And then, disregarding my gloomy shake of the head, he threw himself in a chair with a laugh, and said: 'I was a fool not to ask her before, instead of fighting against the inevitable, and propping myself up with strained sentiment. I should have known that a woman of her generous disposition was above worldly considerations—that love, and love only, is what she demands of the man who is to be her husband. And she shall have it—such love and devotion as she deserves, my darling!'

'And what else can you give her?' I asked.

'What else? More than enough for her simple requirements. You heard what she said; every word she uttered was pure truth. She cannot lie even in jest. Happiness does come from within, and not from without. Hasn't she proved it? Is she happier here than you found her in that den at Brixton?

Would she shun the society of those Moat people if she valued position or the many things that wealth can give? There is more significance in that than you imagine, Doctor. No; it would be all the same to her whether I was rich as Dives or poor as Lazarus. But I shan't be poor. Have I told you what I'm to begin with over there?—fifty dollars a week they're to pay me. There's enough to begin a new life with in a new world: fifty dollars a week—ten pounds to put in her dear hands every Saturday.'

'For how long?' I asked dismally.

'Till I can get more. Don't look at me with that funereal aspect—congratulate me, old boy! I'm not going to be buried; I'm going to be married—and to the dearest, purest, sweetest woman in the wide world.'

He spoke as if he were under the influence of drink; and, indeed, I think this sudden revulsion from despair to joy had intoxicated him; for, as if unable to control his ex-

uberant spirits, he sprang up from his chair and began to walk about the room with hurried, irregular steps, filling his pipe unconsciously with trembling fingers, and spilling the tobacco from his pouch.

'Phew! it's suffocating in here,' he exclaimed; 'I must go out for a good stretch and think. Good-night, dear old chap.'

His hand was hot and moist, as he seized mine and turned to the door.

'Wait,' said I, thinking that I ought to tell him now what I knew of Mary's past. But on reflection it seemed to me fairer to hold my tongue while Mary's decision was in abeyance. It will be time enough to-morrow, and then he will be in a fitter state to listen to reason, which I believe he was utterly incapable of doing at that moment.

'No,' I said, 'we will talk about this to-morrow. Go for your walk, Hal. It will calm you. You are not yourself just now.'

'Not the spiritless, miserable, hopeless wretch I was this morning,' he replied; and so he left me, going out by the back, whence he could look up at Mary's window.

This morning, when I looked out of the window, I saw him in the garden with flowers in his hand; there was no attempt on his part now to keep out of mischief by finishing the work he had left for this purpose. But Mary was not with him.

I went down into my study, and sat down to read one or two letters that had come in by the first post, feeling (for the first time in my life) disinclined to meet St. John. While I was thus employed the door opened, and Mary came in with some flint implements in her hand which I had brought out of my cabinet on our return from Oldbury to compare with the specimen Mary had unearthed. She gave me her cheek to kiss as usual.

'Another,' said she, smiling, when I had kissed her once. 'I had none last night.'

'No, my dear,' I answered, kissing her again, 'you did not come to me as usual; and I know why.'

Still keeping my hand on her shoulder, I looked in her face. The smile had died away, and there were signs of anxiety in its place, with a dark shade under her eyes that betrayed a sleepless night.

'You have had a restless night, Mary,' said I.

'Yes; there was so much to think about.'

'And to decide upon,' I added.

'And to decide upon,' she echoed, turning her eyes to the window, with a far-away look in them.

'But you have decided, my dear?'

She shrugged her shoulders equivocally, and answered:

'I am tempted—tempted. I cannot lose sight of all that I must lose by saying "No."

A life of the dearest happiness that I can dream of in a world where I should be unknown—where I can live in peace. And this question keeps ringing in my ears: Why should I ruin my own life for the sake of those others? Is not my happiness and welfare as precious as theirs? I am only mortal, and more than mortal courage is wanted to renounce such joy and accept such misery as may befall me? My heart bids me take one course——'

'Your principle the other.'

'Principle! It is doubtful if principle, as most men and women understand it, would justify what I am doing. With these consequences before me, I have not dared to go into the garden, where he is waiting for my answer.'

I was glad to hear this, for it implied that she was more reluctant to accept than to decline his offer. Still, I was not quite easy on this point.

'Mary dear,' said I, 'have you thought of the consequences that attend your becoming his wife?'

'Oh, scarcely; the others—the consequences of not becoming his wife—are more than I can yet dispose of. Ah, well!' she said with a sigh, as if to end this troublesome discussion, 'I suppose I shall make up my poor little mind before the afternoon;' and then, to change the subject entirely, she said, offering the flints: 'I have brought back these things.'

'We will put them where they came from,' said I, and leading her to the cabinet, I unlocked the door. 'One thing I ought to know before you speak, if you decide to accept St. John.'

'And what is that?' she asked.

I opened the cabinet door, and pointing to the handcuffs that hung there, I asked:

'Shall I tell St. John the history of those irons, or will you?'

She looked at me in perfect silence for some moments with sorrowful reproach in her calm, reflective eyes, and then she replied in a low, firm voice :

'I will tell him when it is necessary.'

Turning away from me, she started, and glancing in the direction of her gaze, I perceived Morton hastily retreating. The good fellow had entered the room with his noiseless tread, and finding us engaged in serious discussion, had prudently withdrawn.

'Is breakfast ready, Morton ?' I asked.

'Yes, sir,' he replied, just venturing to show his face. 'I beg your parding, sir, for intruding without knocking, but I didn't know you was engaged, bein' a little hard of hearin'.'

I locked the cabinet and then went out into the garden, Mary accompanying me in painful silence, to fetch St. John.

The exaltation of last night had subsided ; he looked sober enough when we met him,

poor fellow!—a sadder and a wiser man. Possibly he half anticipated an adverse answer from Mary by her avoiding a meeting with him in the garden; and the troubled expression in our faces as we came from the house must have wholly convinced him that there was no hope for him. As we shook hands with him, he looked into our faces with the eagerness of one who would foretell the sentence to be passed upon him, and having read his fate, the expectancy faded away in a faint smile, as though he were blaming himself for laying faith in a foolish dream. He handed Mary the gathered flowers with a few graceful words. He was particularly amiable and sweet in his manner to Mary during breakfast, she being unusually quiet and constrained; but the motive that underlay this sweetness was not the self-advancement of a lover, but rather the self-effacement of a generous friend making the way easier to the one he loves. It was

plain he wished her to see that he was prepared for the blow, and could face this last stroke of adversity with the fortitude that becomes a man.

I left them together when the meal was over, and went into the orchard-house, and there, as I was thinning out my grapes, St. John presently joined me, a pipe in his mouth, and a look of entire resignation in his fine face which it pleased me to see.

'It's all over,' said he, 'that fit of madness. I'm fairly sane again, Doctor.'

I gave him my hand, nodding and shaking my head by turns as my feelings fluctuated between approval and deep regret and commiseration.

'It would never do, my dear boy,' said I.

'Oh, I can see that as plainly as you do, now; I couldn't last night, in that sort of delirium of hope that sometimes comes to an unlucky beggar. It's odd that love can make men such selfish brutes. Fancy my

wishing to make her rough it out there! Well, I'm spared the hoeing of a longish row of self-reproaches.'

'She did not give you any reason for her refusal?'

'No; she merely said she could not marry me. I didn't ask her why—did not press her to reconsider the thing. A fate of that kind is not to be accepted by persuasion.'

'No, Hal; no woman ought to marry by persuasion. If she does not give her heart spontaneously, you may rest assured that her heart is not worth having. Mary is the last one in the world to need persuasion, or who would be persuaded in so serious a matter.'

'God bless her!' he murmured fervently, with a little twitching of his lips. Then, mastering his emotion with a visible effort, he continued: 'This obliges me to go a little earlier than I intended—and serve me right

for behaving like a fool. I'll be off to-night. But I must still make an attempt to see my mother and Olive. Do you think it would be safe for me to call there this afternoon ?'

'I am going to Seal, and will call at the Court on my way and see Mrs. Lawson. You shall know the result when I come home to lunch.'

I went in the house and tapped at Mary's door. She responded at once in a faint voice, and came to me putting her handkerchief away in her pocket. She had been crying; her eyes were swollen, and still full of tears.

'You have done your duty, my child,' I said, to give her consolation, as I entered and closed the door.

'Yes; but it is so hard—so hard!' she faltered despondingly; and, then, spreading her arms as if she must embrace someone, I drew her to my heart, when, as if this simple act of love and sympathy had touched

the spring of her grief, she laid her head upon my shoulder and burst into tears again.

I could find no argument for the occasion, and nothing to say, save such words of pity and affection and sorrow as came without thought from my heart. She clung to me as if to assure herself that there was still someone whom she might love, but the poorness of this substitute for that greater love which is the chief end of a woman's being seemed only to augment her suffering. But in a little while her paroxysm subsided. I said something then about the satisfaction that must come with the consciousness of self-renunciation, to which she replied, stanching her tears:

'I have not even that consolation to hope for. I am not sure that this is an unselfish act. It is I who would have had to suffer in time to come—remorse—the punishment of sin, not he; and, oh! I could have made his life happy—for years—maybe, with skill and tact, quite to the end. No

matter,' she continued, choking down a sob. ''tis over now. There ! I will come down again directly.'

She ran upstairs to bathe her face, and returned with more composure ; a smile even flickered over her face for a moment as she entered, but it gave place to a look of earnest thought and concentration as she seated herself and bent her eyes upon the ground in silence. I closed the door, which she had left ajar, and came back, regarding her as she sat thus with compressed lips and knitted brows.

'Something must be done quickly, now that is all over,' she said in a low voice, raising her poor eyes to mine. 'There must be no swaying this way or that. We have decided which course I am to take, and we must go on with it heart and soul right to the end—we have given so much for it. What does he propose to do ?'

'He speaks of going away this evening.

But—and this is what I came to speak to you about—he wants me to learn if he may safely attempt to see his mother and Olive this afternoon. What do you think, my dear?'

'His mother?' she replied, shaking her head. 'No, not yet; it is too soon. The belief that she was seeing him for the last time on earth might produce a revulsion of feeling in her that would upset all Mr. Lawson's plans.'

'Why shouldn't we take advantage of that possibility?'

'Because Mr. Lawson would never permit it. Foreseeing this probable event, he would produce such a condition of mind in her that this interview might be fatal.'

'You still believe in his power as a wizard?' I said.

She smiled, as if at my simplicity in doubting it.

'I am perfectly sure. Wait!' she added,

struck by a sudden recollection, and putting her hand in her pocket, she drew out an unopened letter.

I saw that the address was in the now familiar writing of Lawson. It had been brought by hand, and probably delivered while St. John was with her. She broke the envelope and opened the letter; having read it, she laid it softly on her knee, bending her head in silent thought. After a few moments' reflection, she asked quickly what time it was.

'A quarter to ten,' said I, looking at my watch.

'It may be done. Read that,' she said, handing the letter to me.

The precious rigmarole began (in terms of thinly-veiled passion) with an account of his sufferings in consequence of Mary's 'cruel letter,' and the knowledge that the music he heard from Mill Lane last evening was intended to give happiness to Mr. St. John.

'For an hour,' he wrote, 'I walked up and down there in a torrent of envious jealousy, without purpose, without hope. Yes, dearest, dearest Miss Smith, I can disguise the fact from you no more than I can myself shut my eyes to it; I am jealous of that man, and if you knew the horrible torture I feel in picturing him by your side, touching your dress, your hand, inhaling your dear breath,' etc. Ugh! 'For heaven's sake, have pity on me,' he continued. 'I implore you to mitigate my sufferings. I feel that I cannot live without seeing you, and I am capable of any act of folly to gratify the imperative demands of my heart. You expressed a wish to hear Sarasate. I see by the papers that he is to play at St. James's Hall this afternoon. Will you, in mercy, suffer me to take you to this concert? There is a quick train at twelve o'clock. You could be back at Wrotham by eight. In the desperate hope that you may grant my prayer, I will be

with the brougham opposite Wrotham Church at half-past ten, in order that we may drive over to Sevenoaks, should you prefer to go that way, and I shall wait till the last chance of catching the train at Boro' Green expires.' Then a page of passionate appeal to Mary's condescension wound up the letter, but a P.S. was added, and it ran thus:

'I quite understand. I will not misconstrue your reluctance to meet me while Mr. St. John is in the neighbourhood. You fear that Olive may be led by her insane jealousy to create a scandal by calling at your house and making some absurd charge against you to her brother. There is no cause for any such apprehension, I do assure you. Olive is ignorant of my movements; she is unaware that Mr. St. John is at Dr. Harvey's, and, in addition to this, she is to-day in a condition of mental tranquillity which, alas! is only too rare with the unhappy child.'

'You see what that means,' said Mary, pointing to the P.S., as I returned the letter. 'He has taken the spell off poor Olive for to-day.'

I nodded acquiescence, not to be obstructive, though the notion of a man in these times casting spells over people seemed to me nothing less than an absurdity.

'You must go to the Court and see her,' she continued.

'I intended to do so, my dear.'

'But not before half-past ten—make it later still, if you can.

'It is likely to be nearer twelve than eleven when I call there.'

'That will do. We must take advantage of this opportunity to save Olive. Bring her home here. Keep her here. She must not go back!'

'But, my dear——'

'Oh, it must be!' she cried, rising with excitement, and waving her hand as if to

thrust aside any and every obstacle. 'To-day she is herself. Appeal to her heart; she will respond. Tell her that her brother is going away for ever—that he is desolate and unhappy. She must go with him and take the place I may not have!'

'Bring her away with me! why, to be sure, there's a great deal in what you say. But suppose we are met by Lawson?'

'You will not meet him. I shall accept that invitation.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OCTOBER TWENTY-EIGHTH—*continued.*

MARY came down dressed to play her part, just as Morton brought the trap round to the front. In bidding her good-bye I asked a question on a point which somewhat perplexed me.

'My dear Mary,' said I, 'it's nearly half-past ten now. As like as not I shall have to pass Lawson by the church. I have been rather troubled lately to know how I should behave towards that man without upsetting your plans. Now, what ought I to do?'

'What attitude should you take if I had no plans?' she asked, smiling.

'A very unpleasant one for him,' said I.

'Very well; be just as unpleasant as you like to him. It's the very surest way to prevent his suspecting plans. Think of me, dear,' she continued, dropping her voice and regarding me with a look of pathetic affection—'think of me as your little sister, whose destruction this man is compassing, and speak to him with the feeling that this reflection brings.'

The dreadful apprehension that this was the actual fact, and not mere supposition, so oppressed me that I stood there undecided whether to go out to the chaise and proceed with my business, or to take Mary into my room and remonstrate with her against the fatal course she was pursuing; and Mary, divining this, said:

'Go; we must save Olive at all hazards; and there is no time to spare.'

So I drove off, in woful low spirits, to be sure; but, turning the corner, I perceived Lawson's carriage in the road, and him about

a dozen yards from the church-porch, with a sketch-book in his hand, as a sort of excuse for being there, and the sight of this detestable villain at once fired me with the most vindictive emotion. I was not ill-pleased to be free to speak my mind to him; for to be merely civil to him has been irksome to me for some time past, giving me the unpleasant sense of being a hypocrite; and in a moment a string of cutting sarcasms came into my mind as being appropriate to the occasion—not one of which, however, I recollected till after my little scene with him. Nevertheless, one idea presented itself as a means of hoodwinking him, and proving to Mary at the same time that, simple as I am, I have yet the gumption to aid her plans if I can only get the chance.

As Lawson couldn't pretend not to see me, he turned, and, beaming with that bilious smile of his, came to the side of the path with outstretched hand.

'How do you do, my dear Dr. Harvey—all alone this morning?'

'Yes, sir,' I responded curtly, without taking his hand; 'and I trust you won't take advantage of that fact to call at my house, as you have only too frequently of late!'

'Dr. Harvey!' he exclaimed in remonstrance, 'what does this mean?'

'It means this, sir: Miss Smith asked my permission to take a day's holiday, and on my pressing to know where she was going, I learnt that you had offered to escort her to some place of amusement in London. Now, sir, from her tears when I refused to let her go, I am forced to conclude that she has a great deal more feeling for you than she ought to have. I regard Miss Smith as my sister, and I very much disapprove of your intimacy with her. Too many letters come to the house which she cannot show me, and I find there is a certain secrecy in her meetings and correspondence with you which

would not exist if there were nothing to conceal. I beg you, sir, not to call at my house in the morning when I am out; and I warn you that if any letters come to Miss Smith which I have reason to believe are from you, I shall take the liberty to open them before they reach her hand. I have constituted myself guardian of that good and innocent young lady, and I shall not scruple to take any steps which are necessary to her welfare and the preservation of her honour.'

'Dr. Harvey, I am thunderstruck! This is certainly not the place—in the open road—to make such monstrous insinuations, or to repel them——'

'Very good, Mr. Lawson. You can call upon me and make what explanation you please after two o'clock in the day. Good-morning, sir.'

And with that I woke Bess up with a flick of the whip and drove on, not at all displeased with myself. My only fear was

that I had gone a little too far in my artfulness; would he conclude from what I had said that Mary was not coming, and so return home before she reached the appointed meeting-place? Certainly it would strengthen his passion to think that she had been crying because I forbade her to meet him (a fiction invented to account for her tear-stained eyes), and his rapture would be doubled by her apparent revolt against my authority in her devotion to him; but there was just the possibility that he would not wait there. So I lingered out a call or two until it had struck twelve, and then, coming to the Court, I asked boldly if Mr. Lawson were in—prepared to offer some excuse for my violent behaviour in the road as a pretext for the visit if he had returned. But the servant told me that he had been gone since ten o'clock, and might not return till the evening. Then I knew that it was all right, so far.

'But Mrs. Lawson is at home, sir, so is Miss Olive,' added the servant.

'Very good. I shall find them upstairs in the drawing-room, I suppose?' said I. But before the words were uttered, the morning-room door opened and Olive came hurriedly to meet me, with the air of one taking a bold step in spite of dread. Indeed, a strange mingling of love and fear was painfully evident in her manner as she clung to my hand, now raising her eyes appealingly to mine, now dropping them in shame.

'I have come to talk to you and your mamma on a very important subject, my dear. Shall we go upstairs?' I asked.

'You will find mamma up there. But I may not go. She will not see me.' And then, glancing back to see that we were alone, she added, in a low tone of contrition: 'I deserve my punishment; I cannot forgive myself.'

'Come, come, my child; let us go into the

garden, where we can sit in the sunlight and talk more at our ease, and more hopefully, I trust,' said I, leading her down the passage that opened on the garden at the back of the house. I took her to a garden-seat, and placed myself so that I could see her face, and, to be sure, the expression of sorrow and shame upon those poor careworn features struck me with pity for the unhappy girl. She looks four or five years older than Mary, and has lost all her pretty freshness and the simplicity which was her great charm, and now looks quite old and plain. I could not help comparing her in my mind with Mary, who also has had many terrible experiences ; but these experiences, which have ruined Olive's prettiness, seem only to have added to the reflective beauty of Mary's countenance. Much is due to the difference in temperament of the two young women, but most, I think, to the vast difference between them in intellectual power, Mary having extra-

ordinary strength of mind, Olive rather more than the common weakness of her sex.

'You are very unhappy, my child,' I began.

'Oh, so wretched! so wretched!' she moaned, bowing her head low over her clasped hands; 'I wish that I were dead. If I had the courage to die I would not live.'

'It is not the courage to die you need, my dear, but the courage to live. Nature has placed you here, like everything else in this beautiful world, for some beneficent end; and it is not for you to drop out of the race before a third of your course is run.'

'Is everything here for good purpose? Are there not bad, as well as good, people in the world? And would not the world be more beautiful if the bad were all dead and away?'

'My dear, you have no more right to think that you are bad than I to think that I am good. We are all a compound of both,

and the best are those who strive to be better—who atone for past faults by a more perfect life.'

'But I—I—what hope have I of such atonement?'

'The hope suggested by your present repentance. I know your offence, Olive. It was too open to be ignored. But that is past. You no longer love that man.' She shook her head, shrinking back as if in horror from the thought. 'Well, now that you have overcome that infatuation, what have you to fear in the future?'

'That it may overcome me again as it has before,' she said wildly. 'Oh, you do not understand this horrible fascination—it is a mystery to me myself. After that night when they came from Maidstone it passed away, and I thought myself free. But one day last week it returned—only for a day, thank God!—but its force was as great as ever. I had not the will to overcome it.

And now again I am free ; but to-morrow I may be a slave again to this awful passion. Oh, Doctor, there is some evil power in this place that masters our reason—my mother's as well as mine—some power in this place—and not only here,' she added, almost in a whisper, and glancing apprehensively round between each word—' but—wherever—that man is——' She broke off, as if dreading to say more, adding under her breath : ' Say that we are both mad, my mother and I. That you can believe, but nothing more.'

' But I do believe in something more,' said I firmly, and with the conviction that, absurd or not, Mary's theory was the only one which could reconcile conflicting facts. ' Incomprehensible as it may be, I recognise the infernal influence that this man exercises over you ; and if you are powerless to resist it, there is but one means of escaping it.'

' Have I not said so ?' she asked quietly.

' Not by suicide, which is the last resource

of despair—for you have yet something to live for—something to hope for—but by flying this place now, while the chance is yours——'

'Where can I go?' she asked despairingly. 'I have not a friend in the world—save you.'

'And your brother,' said I tentatively, half fearing that she still entertained that unnatural repulsion to him which she had exhibited when they last met. But at his name her eyes filled with tears as she murmured his name—Harry—lovingly. Truly, as Mary had prognosticated, the spell had been taken from her to-day.

'Where shall I find him?' she asked. 'Could he forgive me if we met again?'

'He is at my house,' said I. 'And if he is harsh to you, my poor child, he is no more the man we love.' And then I told her of his approaching departure—of the opening for a new and a better life in making his lot less hard to bear in that distant world—and

to all this she listened with eager hope animating her wasted face, and giving life to her eyes. And when finally I asked her if she would return to Wrotham with me at once, she sprang up with outstretched hand as if to grasp some visible hold that was to save her from slipping back into the mouth of hell.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OCTOBER TWENTY-EIGHTH—*continued.*

I ROSE from the seat, and led Olive towards the house, she, poor thing! being too dazed by the prospect so suddenly presented to raise any objection to an immediate departure. But on the threshold she stopped, laying her hand on my arm.

'My mother!' she exclaimed under her breath, almost with consternation.

'I am going to see her now, and tell her all. But you may rest assured that she will put no obstacle in the way of your going. She must be as conscious as we of the fatal influences that exist in this house, and whether she loves you or loves you not, she

must wish you gone from here. Get together what is necessary, and be ready to start when I come down, my child.'

I found Mrs. Lawson huddled in a chair by a little table near the window, with a book of devotion before her, and looking more aged and decrepit than ever. There was a cold, despairing expression in her face as she looked up at me, as though she had failed to find even in spiritual reflections consolation for material misfortunes, and she asked me why I had come to see her, in a hard, mistrustful tone.

I told her that her son Harry was staying with me. She nodded, a sardonic smile disfiguring her face, and listened without the slightest sign of feeling to my account of the hardships he had suffered, and of his determination to leave England. When I added that he wished to see her, and that possibly after to-day they would never meet again, she said harshly :

'He is nothing to me—no more than I am to him. I do not wish to see him, and I will not see him,' she added with vehemence. 'I had a presentiment of this last night, and I have told the servants to bar the door against him if he comes. Tell him he will get nothing from me—no, not even the money to pay his passage out.'

'He wants nothing from you, madam, but one kind word of farewell.'

'If such a thing as affection exists, and he has any in his heart, let him leave me to myself. That is all I want of him.'

'You led us to hope otherwise at the time you were making your will,' I suggested.

'When I made my will I was a fool,' she retorted fiercely; 'a fool who still believed in filial love and purity — a fool who still thought I had a child that I might love.'

'Both of your children deserve your love,' I said.

She smiled incredulously, pushing forth her hands as if she were repelling them.

'Well, madam,' said I, seeing that it was impossible to argue against her convictions, 'I came here with two objects. One was to induce you to see your son again; the other, to induce Olive to go away with him.'

'And have you succeeded?' she asked eagerly.

'She is prepared to go. Do you consent?'

'With all my heart,' she said, striking the table with her hand. 'Let them both go. I want to see them no more.'

I rose with a sigh, not wishing to hear more. It distressed me to see this loveless old woman, whom I had known the most devoted and fond of mothers, rejoicing over the departure of her children for ever, chuckling and nodding her head with satisfaction as she smoothed one wrinkled hand with the other. For me it was pathetic, besides being horrible and revolting.

'When did they make this arrangement, Dr. Harvey?' she asked.

'There has been no communication whatever between them,' I began.

'Ha! they have made you believe that,' she interrupted. 'You don't know my children. He is aware that Olive is to get the estate at my death, and is anxious not to lose sight of her.'

'This is preposterous on the face of it, my dear Mrs. Lawson. For what mercenary end can they have in view, knowing that at any moment you can destroy the will you made in Olive's favour?'

'I cannot destroy it,' she exclaimed. 'Olive stole it, and both know it is safe. I told you that you did not know my children.'

I could only look at this unhappy creature in silent amazement.

'I kept the will in a secret place, known only to myself—so I believed,' she continued. 'I told no one where it was—not a living

soul. But Olive found it out, and she has stolen it.'

'With what motive?' I asked. 'What possible good would the mere possession of the will be to her, when it lay in your power at any moment to make another revoking the first? That would be sheer madness. And come now, madam—this points to a way by which you may prove the unmercenary spirit of your children, and the truth of their affection for you. Make another will while I am here—bequeath every farthing you possess to a charitable institution; there are many that need it—and let me take a copy of this will to your son. I answer for it that both he and Olive will thank God from their very souls to be freed from the vile suspicion of sordid selfishness, and will prove their affection by still greater devotion to you.'

'That would prove nothing but a design to dupe me again,' she said, opening a drawer in the table.

I took up my hat, feeling how useless all argument was against the views taken through the distorting medium of suspicion.

'The thing you suggest is not new to me,' she continued, taking a folded paper from the drawer; 'I have written a dozen wills disinheriting Olive—not to prove her love, you may be certain. There is one; look at it.'

I took the paper and examined it. It was written in her own neat, regular hand, every letter perfectly legible and well formed. In substance she had clearly followed the will drawn up by Fawcett with the exception of her daughter's name as principal legatee, and for that she had substituted the name of a London hospital. But the deed was unsigned. In the place where the signature should have been was a network of formless and undecipherable scratches, as if a child had been scribbling there.

'Very good, madam,' said I, 'this seems

perfectly regular. You have only to sign it. I and one of the servants will witness the signature.'

'I cannot sign it,' she said in a low tone, as if awed by her own incapacity.

'I understand — when it comes to disinheriting your children, your will fails you?'

'No, no—not that. See,' said she, pointing to the network of pen-marks, 'I have tried again and again. Give me a pen—I will try once more.'

I gave her a pen; her features compressed in stern resolution, she set her hand firmly to the paper, and endeavoured to write her name. The pen moved in every direction but that she wished it to take, forming a knot of shapeless lines, like nothing in the world but a tangled skein of thread.

'It is hopeless, you see,' she said, dropping the pen at length.

I looked at the scrawl, and then at her, in wondering incredulity. The thing was too

amazing to believe. Then I put a sheet of paper before her, and begged her to write the several letters that composed her name in an irregular order. She complied, writing them with perfect ease and faultlessly; but when, at my request, she attempted to connect the letters and combine them in the two words 'Henriette Lawson,' her pen wandered as before in the same erratic and incomprehensible manner.

I have written this brief account of our interview with difficulty, for it is an unpleasant subject to write about. And I have suppressed many virulent charges Mrs. Lawson made against Olive, and all the Scriptural texts by which she sought to justify her vindictive animosity to her children, for I regard them merely as the utterance of irresponsible mania. But I have dwelt upon her remarkable inability to write her own name because it has special interest as a phenomenon not to be attributed

to any ordinary form of insanity, and only to be explained by supposing the existence of an outer influence exercised for a sinister purpose. Considering how Lawson's designs would be frustrated by the signing of this will, it is presumable that, if he possesses some occult power, he would employ it to produce this extraordinary state of mental paralysis as the sole means by which, at Mrs. Lawson's death, he could obtain her money by marrying Olive. And that he actually does possess this power is less difficult to conceive as I look back at the events of the past six months, and note several instances of a similar demonstration. Olive's incapacity to move from the stairs, or to utter a sound when she saw in the hall below the brother she was yearning to embrace; a like inability to move or call attention when I passed close by her in the garden—these and many other facts indicate that she also has been made subject to temporary paralysis. And do not

her fluctuating moods of love and hate, of jealousy or indifference, all point to the same governing cause? Is this not identical with the spell which Mary affirms he has the power to cast over these unhappy women? Truly, it seems as if I also must believe in the mysterious and supernatural powers of Mr. Lawson. (Since writing the above, I have narrated to Mary what passed between Mrs. Lawson and myself. She showed not the least surprise at Mrs. Lawson's unavailing attempt to sign the will. 'Mr. Lawson does not wish her to sign it,' she said, and to obtain the fulfilment of his wish she seemed to regard as a most simple feat for a man of Lawson's powers to perform.) Still, I ask myself, Why should he work in this roundabout way to get the money? Why, if he have this power, should he not employ it to make Mrs. Lawson hand over her estate to him? He would then be at liberty to force Olive to become his wife afterwards, or to

abandon her as circumstances and his own inclination directed. But I remember now what Mary said about his fear of St. John disputing the inheritance. Certainly he is not a bold villain, but seems to be rather a contemptible, sneaking, and cowardly scoundrel; and, to be sure, any sort of legal inquiry might reveal facts that would not only deprive him of a considerable fortune, but give him a lengthy term of imprisonment. A craven spirit and a bad heart generally go together, and so, if there is a safe way of achieving his end, he will naturally take it in preference to the hazardous one, even though it be roundabout and tortuous.

Olive was waiting for me in a dark angle of the stairs, dressed for departure.

'Your mother will not see you, my dear,' I said.

She shook her head sadly, as if this were a foregone conclusion, and then glanced

timorously down in the hall before accepting my arm.

'You have nothing to fear—Mr. Lawson will not return till nightfall; and if he were here now he should not prevent you leaving the house with me.'

I said this with confidence then, not realizing, as I do now, the full reach of his power.

The poor girl was very silent for some time, responding in faltering monosyllables to my observations, and sometimes so wide of the mark that it was plain her thoughts were elsewhere. I could see by her agitation, and the light and shade that played in the expression of her anxious face, that her joy in the prospect of a happier and better future was overcast by recurring fears of St. John's resentment. Would he forgive her the sins of the past? At length a flash of hope lit up her eyes, just as we were nearing the village, and, after one or two

hesitating attempts to speak, she said timidly:

'Dear Dr. Harvey, does Harry know everything?'

'You mean your infatuation for Mr. Lawson—your jealousy of Mary?'

She nodded quietly, with pain in her face.

'No, my dear; we have told him nothing about that.'

'Must I tell him—all—all?'

'Why, my dear, it's a bad thing to keep secrets. The truth must come out sooner or later——'

'Yes, later, later!' she said, hurriedly interrupting me. 'When we are far away, and he sees that I love him dearly, and am doing all I can to make him happy. Not now, when he must doubt the truth of my affection, and think when he hears all this horrible truth that there is no good at all in me—nothing but evil feelings and wickedness.'

I was silent for a moment; then, thinking that Harry had enough to bear in his own disappointment just now, and that the knowledge of Olive's monstrous love for her stepfather would rob him of the consolation he would have in taking his sister with him to America, I agreed that it would be for the best to postpone her confession. This seemed to remove a great load from poor Olive's mind, and when she met Harry she rushed into his arms, twining her arms about his neck, and kissing him with hysterical joy.

'Your mother refuses to see you, Hal,' said I, 'but she has consented to let Olive go away with you.'

'Yes, dear,' she added, 'and I am going to be so good. I will do everything you wish, and be no trouble to you.'

'Trouble to me, my little sister!' he exclaimed, caressing her with tender solicitude, as he looked down into her careworn face, which in the first moment of their meeting

had given him an obvious shock; 'why, you will be the comfort of my life. We'll begin it all over again, 'Livy dear, over there in that other world; finding new flowers in the woods, fresh things to marvel over, just as we did in our first childhood.'

'Oh, Harry, Harry!' she said, beginning to cry, 'it's not thinking of the past makes me stupid like this, but of the happiness to come. But I've brought nothing with me,' she broke off, in a tone of sudden alarm as childlike as her tears, 'and I shall want so many things——'

'So much the better—we'll have nothing to recall the past, not a shred. We'll forget all that we leave behind us—except our dear old friend here; and we shall only have to look at each other to be reminded of his love for us.'

We laughed and chattered at lunch; but there was a load at my heart and at St. John's also, and Olive's gaiety was too high-

pitched to be natural—it was the note of an over-strung chord, which might snap at any moment.

When we were alone in the afternoon, St. John said to me:

'You have softened the blow for me, Doctor. It's awfully good of you.' He spoke, though, as if that blow had already crushed all happiness from his heart. 'She will help me to get the better of this, and make a man of me. We are bound to be content, if not over-joyous, out there. Poor little Olive! It knocked me over when I first saw her. Of course, I knew by what you have said now and then that she was not happy at the Court, but it must have been hell itself to have changed her so. Perhaps she will find a husband out there,' he added, after a pause; 'if not, we can go on happily, old bachelor and old maid.' Then, after another pause, 'I should like to see Mary, just to say good-bye, Doctor.'

'She may be home to dinner, Hal.'

'I hope so. But we will pack off in the evening, all the same. It was like her to go away for the day, and so give me a little longer with you. But I do hope to see her for one moment.' Then, after a yet longer interval, he said, as if there were a peculiar significance in it for him: 'I have finished the panel at last.'

CHAPTER XXX.

OCTOBER TWENTY-EIGHTH—*continued.*

Mary had not arrived at six, so we sat down to dinner without her, and this meal, the last we were to have together, passed off even more gloomily for St. John and me than our lunch. We were both oppressed by the coming separation, which at my time of life I could only regard as eternal. The food choked me ; the wine had rather a depressing than an exhilarating effect. I would gladly have escaped from the room and given my pent-up feelings their natural vent. St. John also participated in my distress, and feeling that it must be ended quickly, he took

up a time-table as soon as we entered my little room.

'There's a train at 7.45,' said he, looking down the page—'Victoria 8.30; just time to settle you, 'Livy dear, in my diggings, before finding a niche for myself.'

Having agreed upon this matter, I went out to give instructions respecting the chaise; when I returned, St. John was still studying the time-table, but I saw at a glance that he was looking at the down-line trains. I knew why, being myself curious about those down-train arrivals for the same reason. I had told him that Mary was gone to London (though, of course, saying nothing about Lawson). I was wondering whether she might not arrive about the time we reached the station—the arrivals and departures at Boro' Green being frequently during the day almost coincident.

'Yes, that will do,' said St. John, rising, with a dash of hope in his face, to take a

cigar. I felt sure by that he had discovered that a train was to come in from London about 7.45; however, I argued to myself that if we reached the station in good time we might cross the line on to the up-platform before the down-train arrived, and so escape a meeting with Mary and Lawson, which, for Olive's sake as well as St. John's, I felt must be avoided.

We were at the station by 7.30. I took the tickets, giving one to Olive and the other to St. John, as the last little present I could make them; then I proposed that we should cross the line. But St. John, who was as anxious to meet Mary as I to avoid her, was a match for me in subtlety.

'Oh, there's lots of time,' said he. 'Why on earth should we cross yet? It's raining hard and blowing half a gale; there's no shelter over there but a brutal shed, and there's neither fire nor light in it. Here, at least, we can see each other for a little longer.'

I had nothing to say against these arguments, but I was put all in a twitter with apprehension as I heard the grinding of wheels in the soft road before the booking-office, and looked out to see Mr. Lawson's brougham drawing up. Clearly they were returning by the next train, and Lawson had telegraphed for the carriage to meet them. I cursed my unlucky genius for prompting me to come before the time, and presently the porter rang a bell and sang out, 'Maidstone train.'

'It is cold, certainly,' said I, stamping my feet. 'Let us go in the waiting-room.' I took Olive's arm and led her in; but St. John was apparently too absorbed in the by-laws to take any notice.

'Well, well,' thought I, 'he knows nothing for an absolute certainty against Lawson, and so no great harm can come of his seeing Mary with him, though it must unsettle him. The main thing is to escape an unpleasant

scene which might have ensued if Lawson, seeing Olive, demanded an explanation.'

However, circumstances were all against me, and even this satisfaction was denied me, for just after the down-train had come to a stand, the porter rang his bell again, and called out 'London train.' Now it was necessary to leave the waiting-room and cross the line. There was no alternative; so I took Olive's arm and led her out of the waiting-room to pass through the booking-office on to the platform. The passengers from London were already giving up their tickets at the door and passing through the booking-office. St. John's big form was before us, planted there where he could command a view of the stream of people going out of the station. Just as I reached his side, hoping to rush him through, he started, and I heard the sound of Mary's clear voice at the entrance. She was coming through with Lawson—she had her hand on

his arm, and both were smiling—he with his sickly, unmeaning grimace, she with a touch of archness in her eyes, for Mr. Harding, in hurrying out, had stayed to say a word or two to her.

Mary did not see us, but Lawson did, though he made no sign of recognition. For a moment his eye was fixed with peculiar significance upon Olive—then he turned to speak to Mary as they went out by the open door.

There was not a moment to spare; the Maidstone train had gone on from the platform, and the porter rang the second bell, calling, 'Now then, please, going on?' As if under an irresistible attraction, St. John took a step to follow Mary. Leaving Olive's side, I ran after him.

'The train is just coming in,' I said; 'we must cross at once.'

'No matter—I must speak to Mary,' he replied, disengaging his arm from my hand,

and pressing forward to make his way through the knot of people who blocked the doorway, getting their umbrellas up and arranging their skirts for the walk before them. The up-train was now running up to the platform. At least, I could get across with Olive; very likely St. John would get that last word spoken, and rush up in time to catch the train. I turned round for Olive, whom I had left standing near the ticket-box but half a minute before. She was gone!

The booking-office was now empty. Had she taken refuge in the waiting-room, fearing that Lawson would return to fetch her? No; the waiting-room was as empty as the booking-office. As I hurried back, looking hither and thither in perplexity, St. John strode in with a white face and a dangerous brightness in his eye.

'Olive is gone. Where is she? Have you seen her?' I asked quickly.

He shook his head in silence, but with the

air of one whom nothing could now astonish nor hurt ; and without a word he strode along by my side as I hurried over the line. We passed a thin stream of out-going passengers, and before we reached the platform the train moved on ; it was gone, and looking back on us with its one red eye, when we reached the shelter. Not a soul was there ; there was no one now on the platform but the porter swinging his lamp.

'Have you seen Miss St. John—a short, young lady dressed in dark clothes ? Did she go on by the London train ?' I asked him.

'I know Miss St. John ; she might ha' gone on, but I didn't see her, sir,' he replied.

'She must have gone. She had her ticket. She counted upon your getting in at the last moment,' I said to St. John. He made no response. That other trouble seemed to have dulled his wits and made him careless of all else.

We returned to the booking-office, and found that the next up-train was due at Boro' Green at 9.10.

'We shall have time to go home, and see if she has gone back there,' I suggested; and to this he acquiesced with an eager nod.

My mind was occupied with speculations respecting the disappearance of Olive, and I spoke of nothing else for some time, as we returned homewards. When I had exhausted every surmise and could say no more, St. John broke silence for the first time.

'She went away in his carriage—Mary,' he added, upon my turning quickly in astonishment. His thoughts had not gone from her. 'But she passed this chaise, and must have known you were here,' he continued.

'Oh, a covered carriage is better for a lady such a night as this. I can't blame her.'

'They were laughing—she had her hand in his arm. Did you know they were together?'

'Well—yes, Hal, to tell the truth, I did.'

'And you thought it best to keep me in the dark,' he said, with a harsh laugh. 'How long has this been going on?'

'What do you mean, Hal, my boy?' I asked nervously.

'Oh, you know. They wouldn't go to London together for a whole day unless their intimacy was ripe. How long has she been flirting with him—that's what I want to know?'

'Well, Hal, for reasons that I cannot give you at the moment, but for one which must be self-evident—I mean, for the sake of seeing your mother and Olive occasionally—we have never broken friendly relations with Mr. Lawson——'

'Friendly relations!' he broke in, with another bitter laugh; 'that cadaverous villain's eyes were puffed with passion.'

I could say nothing in reply, feeling vexed and wretched by this sudden and unfortunate

turn of events, and also by Bess's pertinacious dog-trot, and by the driving rain—in fact, by everything. I gave Bess a good cut, and muttered a desperately bad word or two, to relieve my feelings.

'Where have they been all the day?' asked St. John sullenly.

'They've been to a concert, Hal. An afternoon concert. At St. James's Hall.'

'He—he has been sitting at her side, his arm touching hers for hours together, while I have been eating my heart out with the hope of seeing her face again for a moment. They must have dined together — come home together in the same compartment, alone.'

'Now you're unreasonable, Hal. You applauded her delicacy in going away that you might not feel constrained to leave earlier than you intended. Would you have had her wander about the lanes by herself in this infernal beastly wind and rain?'

I had him there, and as he could make no response I followed up my advantage.

'I'm surprised at you, my boy, and disappointed, too. And after you relinquished her with such a good grace! What difference can it make to you whether she accepts attentions and kindness from A or from B?'

'What difference!' he exclaimed, raising his voice. 'All the difference in the world. I could have given her up to a decent fellow. Yes, I could have seen her married to that man at The Moat with gladness for her good fortune; but do you think I can stand tamely by and see her throw herself away on a miserable, debased, hypocritical scoundrel like Lawson? Not I. If he is good enough for her, I am good enough.'

The discussion was closed by our arriving at my door. Hearing the wheels, Morton came out to take the pony.

'Has Miss Smith returned?' St. John asked hoarsely.

'No, sir,' he replied smartly.

'Have you seen Miss St. John?' I asked.

'I ha'n't seen her, sir, since she left the house with you, sir.'

'We will go back to the station, Hal,' said I. 'She must have gone on by that train.'

'I will go to the Court first,' said he, stepping out. 'Alone by preference, Doctor.'

'But Olive——'

'If she is not at the Court—and I do not expect to find her there—I will go on to London. She must wait at Victoria till I come.'

And without another word, even of farewell, he strode off into the night.

What was I to do? I stood irresolute for a moment, half disposed to go after him. But he had said with marked emphasis that he preferred to go alone, from disinclination

to my being present at the scene which must ensue when he met Mary, for it was her, not his sister, whom he was seeking at the Court. Yet I could not let him go on foot like that. Besides, despatch was necessary for Olive's sake.

'Here, Morton, my good fellow,' said I, stripping off my mackintosh. 'Clap on this waterproof, and overtake Mr. St. John. He is taking the short road to Higham Court. Tell him I wish him to make use of the chaise.'

Morton slipped on the mackintosh with alacrity, and, jumping into the trap, started off at a pace that I could never get out of Bess. Then I turned into the house. In the passage I started with surprise, for there was Mary coming quickly towards me, dressed as I had seen her at the station.

'Where is she?' she asked. 'Olive!'

'Gone,' I replied. 'Disappeared, I don't know how.'

She sank down on one of the hall chairs, as if overcome by this disaster.

I told her how I had left her for a few moments to overtake St. John, and how we had searched for her and failed to find her.

'There was just time for her to cross the line and get into the train,' I said, in conclusion, 'and I believe she will be found at Victoria.'

She shook her head despondently, and asked if Olive had seen Mr. Lawson.

'Yes,' I answered; 'and I know he looked at her, but only while one could count a dozen——'

'That was long enough for him to let her know that she was to return to the Court. She has gone back; and now, when it seemed that we had won the victory! Oh, it is disheartening!'

'St. John has gone to the Court; if she is there you may be sure he will bring her away.'

'No; he may search the house from top to bottom, but he will not find her. And such a night as this he might pass within a yard of her in the garden without seeing her.'

'But seeing him—hearing him—she can raise her voice—go to him.'

'Not if Mr. Lawson wishes the contrary. If his spell is upon her, she will stand like a statue.'

I also sank into a chair, feeling our hopeless condition; for here was another case of mental paralysis, which I could no longer doubt was to be produced by Lawson's will.

'Morton told me you had not come back,' I said at length, with that feeble irrelevance which one exhibits under prostration.

'Mr. St. John came to the carriage window as we were leaving the station,' she answered. 'I felt sure that he would come here to speak to me, and—and I am too weak to-night to play a brave part.'

'Well, my dear,' said I, 'tis no good being more wretched than we can help. Let us get to the fireside, for I see you are as cold as I am. We may still hope that accident will favour us, and that St. John may bring his sister back presently.'

It was fully an hour before our strained ears caught the sound of chaise-wheels passing down Mill Lane. I hurried across the garden to the stable-yard, where Morton was bringing in the chaise. He was alone.

'Where is Mr. St. John?' I asked.

'Left him at the station, sir.'

'Had he anyone with him?'

'No, sir.'

'You took him to the Court, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir.' Then, seeing that I was waiting there for further information, he added: 'There was sort of ructions there, sir, in a manner of speakin'. Barker, the footman, and Evans, the coachman, sir, they was for shutting the door in Mr. St. John's face;

but there, sir, Mr. St. John he swept 'em out of his way just as I might sweep a couple of flies; and he went all over the house, sir, I presume, from the lights dodging first in one window then another. And when he came out he called Miss Olive, sir, in an 'igh voice; but there wasn't any answer, so he told me to take him to Boro' Green, sir, which I did, accordingly.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

OCTOBER TWENTY-NINTH.

It was late when Mary came down to breakfast this morning. Apologizing for keeping me waiting, she said:

'I overslept myself — that must seem strange to you at such a time as this.'

'Not at all, my dear,' I replied; 'for I'll be bound you fell asleep no sooner than I did.'

She shrugged her shoulders, and filled my cup, saying she hoped we should have some more bright days before the winter came in real earnest. And I marvelled more than ever at her wonderful composure and self-command. There was scarcely a sign of

fatigue in her beautiful face, and her eyes were bright with energy. In every action there was seen decision, and yet withal there was tender sweetness in the play of her lips, her glance was gentle and full of repose, and no movement of hand, or head, or body was without feminine grace. She avoided serious discussion as a subject unsuited to the breakfast-table, but she spoke with perfect coolness about the concert, showing by her observations that she had listened to the music with keen interest.

'With that man by your side, Mary,' said I, 'I cannot understand how you could pay any attention to what was going on in the orchestra.'

'It was by paying attention to the orchestra that I forgot the man by my side,' she replied with a smile. 'And really he is not so terrible to me as he must seem to you. Even when we are quite alone, which is the most trying time, I manage quite easily to

keep him within the ordinary bounds of civility.' She laughed quietly, as if at some recollection, and then said, dropping her voice to a tone inaudible beyond the closed door: 'Do you know, I think he must have heard something about me—of the past. He is so terribly afraid of me at times, so submissively respectful when I look like that at him'—she illustrated her meaning by fixing her eyes steadily on me with a menacing expression in the curve of her dark brows which seemed to say, 'You had better be careful; I am not to be played with.'

I myself, though I know her gentle nature, felt that with that look upon me I should be chary of equivocal expressions.

'For one thing,' she added, her stern regard fading in a wistful smile, 'he knows that I carry this.' She dropped her hand into the folds of her dress and drew it up with a long, narrow clasp-knife held lightly between her thumb and forefinger, the

polished back of the blade gleaming in the light. 'What a good thing it is,' said she, slipping the knife into her pocket, 'and what a blessing for the weak that bad men are such cowards! Not half a cup?' she added, after pressing me to take some more tea—'no? Well, then, now to our affairs. Have you seen Mr. St. John this morning?'

'No.'

'Nor received a telegram from him?'

'No.'

'A certain proof that he has not found Olive, and that we have nothing to hope for in that direction. A proof, too, that he is coming here. Soon,' she added, with a look of pain as she covered her face with her hands.

'Yes, we may expect that,' said I. 'And now, Mary dear, let us settle beforehand what we are to say to him. Don't you think the time has come for telling him all that we know, all that we suspect?'

She shook her head, without uncovering her face; then, after a pause, looking up with a sigh, she said:

'Olive and her mother must be first in our consideration. If he knew all that we know, what could he do? No more than he did last night. Nothing can be done by force—nothing. We see that. Supposing he went again to the Court, accused Mr. Lawson to his face of all his crimes, thrashed him even within an inch of his life for punishment, would that save Olive and her mother? On the contrary, punishment would only spur Lawson to be revenged on Mr. St. John, and the knowledge that his secret was discovered would assuredly urge him to use his power in some desperate means to achieve his end at once. As certainly it would put him on his guard against me, and then snap goes our little cord, and all we have been striving for is lost.'

I have noticed that she always speaks as

if I were as active an agent as herself in this design; whereas I am at best but a passive factor.

'But, my dear,' I remonstrated feebly, 'has he not the right to exercise his own discretion in a matter that so nearly concerns himself? I know your argument. You would say a man has no discretion when his heart is touched. Undoubtedly he would not suffer you to carry out a design which may involve you in terrible consequences, even to save his mother and sister from the machinations of this villain. But at the same time, might he not call upon the law to take your place and defeat the rascal?'

'What could the law do to punish Mr. Lawson for what he has done, even if we had proof—which we have not—of past evil practices? What could it do to prevent him going further, and completing his wickedness?'

'A lawyer would be better able than I to answer those questions, my dear.'

'See your friend who came here, and ask him. See him yourself; but oh! for the sake of those poor women, don't tell Mr. St. John till you are perfectly sure that the law can step in between them and that man. We must think of Mr. St. John—we cannot help that—but we who have taken such a desperate part in this business must also have a voice in the direction of it.'

'As you will, my dear,' said I. 'The part I take is small enough, but the least I can do is not to thwart your plans—whilst I can believe that they are not leading you yourself into too great a peril.'

'Oh, you can rest quite at ease upon that point,' she said, rising with a faint smile, and laying her hand significantly on her pocket.

I was preparing to go out—for one of my patients lies in a most precarious state—when I heard St. John's voice in the house.

He had come in by the side way, and gone straight to Mary's room. On going downstairs I joined them without ceremony, though I knew by the tone of St. John's voice that he was in angry altercation with Mary.

His aspect frightened me. Mud-stained and unkempt, his haggard face distorted with passionate wrath, he was utterly unlike the sad, resigned man with whom I talked yesterday of the peaceful life men lead whose acts are governed by philosophy.

Still, there was nothing repulsive in his appearance, as there is in most men under the domination of jealous fury. On the contrary, there was an imposing grandeur in this demonstration of virile force and reckless determination. He looked to me like a lion disputing the possession of a mate.

'If you will not be mine you shall not be his,' he was saying as I entered the room.

'Ah, I see,' Mary replied, smiling play-

fully, but with a dangerous glitter in her eye, which showed that her spirit revolted against coercion. 'Man proposes, Mr. St. John disposes. But does not this seem to you a little premature? The man has not proposed yet. I assure you, Mr. Lawson has not asked me to be his.'

'I warn you in time. You have not long to wait for his offer—such an offer as he can make.'

'May I ask what right you have to prevent my accepting that offer?'

'The right that the strong have to defend the weak—the right by which humanity forbids suttee or any other barbarous sacrifice—the right by which a man may stay another from self-destruction.'

'I cannot see how that law applies to one whose nearest approach to self-destruction has been a visit to London under the escort of a gentleman.'

'A gentleman—that scoundrel!'

'Have you any proof that he is a scoundrel, Mr. St. John?'

'I have sufficient proof in his making love to you while my mother still lives.'

Mary laughed lightly.

'Your code of morality is almost as severe as your laws,' she said. 'I fear there are a great many scoundrels in society if every gentleman who takes a lady to a concert is to be found guilty of making love to her.'

'You know his purpose as well as I, who read it in his face as he leered in yours last night. But he shall not succeed—no, by the Lord! I would sooner see you dead upon the floor there—even if I had to take your life with this hand.'

Mary regarded him in silence, awed by this tempest of passion. He paced across the room, and, catching sight of an open letter by the desk at which she had been writing, he turned, and with unabated fierceness asked:

'Who is that letter from? Whom are you writing to?'

Mary rose with returning courage and resolution in her calm face. Going to the desk, she laid her hand on the letter, and looking at him with unflinching eyes, replied in a low, clear voice, and slowly:

'Mr. St. John, you tempt me almost by your violence to refuse an answer to that question; but since I wish you to have no misconception of my position, and to understand that I shall be guided entirely by my own discretion, and be sole mistress of my actions, I will leave you in no doubt upon this subject. This letter is from Mr. Lawson. I received it this morning.'

'Why, my dear,' said I, 'I told him yesterday morning that I would not have him send letters to you here.'

'Ah!' exclaimed St. John, 'you too have seen what is going on, and disapprove it.'

'Yes,' said Mary quietly, 'in a postscript

here Mr. Lawson explains that as an excuse for sending his letter surreptitiously. He says,' continued she, glancing at the open page, 'that, since the concert yesterday was so enjoyable to both of us, he hopes I will give him the pleasure of going to the next of the series with him. This,' she continued, turning to her own letter, 'is my reply, accepting his invitation, and,' looking up full in St. John's face, 'I shall go.'

'Do you know what this is leading to?' St. John asked hoarsely, after regarding her for a moment or two in speechless dismay.

'Yes; Mrs. Lawson is in failing health. Sooner or later Mr. Lawson will ask me to be his wife. My position is so precarious that I cannot afford to lose sight of that possibility. At any moment I may offend Dr. Harvey—I may have done so already that would necessitate my leaving this house. What is to become of me then? You know

my condition when you found me. I have no wish to sink to such a level again. I like ease and the little luxuries that money commands too well for that. I like them so much that I feel I should be discontented without them. It would be the greatest mistake, feeling like this, to marry a poor man. That would be making two people unhappy instead of the one who, as I read, must always play the miserable part in married life. You will say I am worldly and unfeeling. I don't wish you to think me at all better than I am, or I should not make this lengthy confession. I want you to see only that I am perfectly reasonable, and perfectly resolved to do nothing which is unreasonable. You consult your own interests in going to America. I stay here for the same reason—and marry Mr. Lawson. Men are governed by self-interest, and to be happy women must follow their example. That is my belief.'

'And the devil take the foremost of your godless creed!' cried St. John; and with that he turned his back upon her and strode out of the room.

END OF VOL. II.

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